



# Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Volume 03 (end)

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# Volume 03 Contents

*Before You Read (Reference) ~*

*Book Six: Their Respective Paths*

Chapter 55  
Chapter 56  
Chapter 57  
Chapter 58  
Chapter 59  
Chapter 60  
Chapter 61  
Chapter 62  
Chapter 63  
Chapter 64

*Translation Notes*

*Book Seven: The Magnificence of Country*

Chapter 65  
Chapter 66  
Chapter 67  
Chapter 68  
Chapter 69  
Chapter 70  
Chapter 71  
Chapter 72  
Chapter 73  
Chapter 74: Finale  
Chapter 75: Special

*Translation Notes*

*Translation Extras*

The People  
The Countries  
The Title  
Errors  
Easter Eggs

*Special Acknowledgements*

*Credits*



## Before You Read (Reference)

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*In my attempt to romanise the different ranks of the Gu Fang hierarchy, I have used various words from the peerage system and then updated them. Others, such as the servant hierarchy is common knowledge. I do try to romanise the language as much as possible, while keeping the basic meaning to avoid confusion. If you still get lost in the midst of the rank naming, just get into this story (this part can serve as a reference). Hopefully it'll all clear out later.*

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### Nobility/Government Court Ranks

- King: (part of the “Royal House”, lives in the “Royal Residence”), holds all power, married to the Queen and often, several concubines part of the royal harem.
- Prince/Princess: Only the direct inheritors of the throne (the sons of the King) will be given this title. (Part of the “Royal House”, lives in the “Royal Residence.”) A high-ranking princess may marry a lesser known man, known as the Prince Consort.
- Duke: Similar in rank to Prince, may or may not have royal blood connections. In other words, dukes may be princes or people from recognised families. Being called a “duke” seems to give more military advantage. (Part of the “House of...”, lives in a “...Ducal Residence”). The wife of a duke is known as the Duchess and their sons may be able to inherit subsidiary titles such as “the Marquess of...”
- Scholar: Not nobility. Usually a commoner/peasant who has gotten the King’s respect due to high placing in national exam. Top scholars tend to be awarded an “official” rank and often became City Governor or military commanders. Sort of like the “count” role in the peerage system.
- Official: All of the above, except women (e.g duchess) and the King. Basically, they can all serve in court. This is technically synonymous with “minister”. The most trusted officials are often from well-known families, especially the two below.
- Senior Official: A more correct translation would be “Prime Minister”; however, it’s a bit too late to change the translation of volume 01. The most important official that serves the courts.
- Elder Statesman: Literal translation is “nation’s husband”, however, the Elder Statesman appears to be the father of the Queen, or Prince Consort etc.

### Military Ranks

- [Military] General: The strongest warrior(s) and/or main commander(s) of the war. This person may go to the front lines and fight. There is also sometimes a “Main General.”
- [Military] Advisor: Someone who doesn’t usually go to fight (but may go to battlefield if needed). Basically someone who thinks of all the tactics to use and does the planning etc. I’m using the word “advisor” to cover both strategists and tacticians.
- [Military] Commander: A person who commands an army or part of it, to war when needed.
- Warrior: A soldier who is recognised for his strength in battle.
- Soldier: A fighter in the war.

**\*\*The King is supposed to have absolute control over the military. They may, however, give out a Flag of Command so that another person may control the army on his behalf. In this novel, the term “military” is used synonymously to “army”.**

### Servant Ranks

- Upper Servants: Housekeeper, Lady’s Maid, manservants, Doctor
- Senior Servants (Middle/Lower upper, requires some skill): Nurse, Cook, Seamstress
- Under Servants (manual labour): Housemaids (e.g. Kitchenmaid, Matron, maid), Footmen, Eunuchs

### Addressing Others (if not by name/politer form)

- Contrary to proper peerage address, the King is still often addressed as “King” instead of “Sire” or “Your Majesty”, while the Queen is still often addressed as “Queen”. Likewise, “Duke”, “Duchess”, “Princess” etc.

- People will be greeted as “Mister”/“Sir” or “Miss”/“Missus”/“My Lady”/“Madam” or by title. (less polite>more polite)
- When referring by third person, not by title, after all (possessive) pronouns or articles must be capitalised, i.e “the Lady” (specifically referring a lady), “his Master” etc.
- The direct master of any servant may be addressed as “Master” or “My Lady”.
- The nurse will be acknowledged as “Mother ~”. Sometimes older (under) maids may also be acknowledged as a “matron”.
- Important maids may be addressed as “Sis ~” by younger maids, or as “Miss ~” by older maids.
- “You” pronoun is used very rarely. Usually it is omitted or replaced with one of the above simple because it’s not necessary in Chinese grammar. However, this can make it very hard to translate without leading to confusion. Often the above has been used in translation to make things clearer.

\*Servants often inherit their master’s family name.

### **Name Patterns** (these often indicate something about identity)

- -Boy: This is actually the antonym of “lao” (old) but this nickname method is usually used for men and stereotypically, tired middle-aged men (though a lot of teenagers use it too nowadays). Therefore the use of “boy” is the same sort of off-putting, belittling, but at the same time endearing, as the use of “lao”.
- Xiao-: Literally means “small”. A form of endearment. Think of this as “-chan” (Japanese) honorifics. In historical context, the addition of this character does give a slave-like quality to it, especially to women’s names. However, I tend to not keep this prefix as it makes names sound too similar, especially for non-Chinese speakers. Besides, a single character for a name, e.g “Hong” already gives a poor impression, as richer families tend to give their children compound names (more than one character, e.g. “Pingting”).
- -‘er: This character doesn’t really mean anything on its own (though it does seem to slur the character before it). This is also a form of endearment. Think of this as a “-y” or “-ie” in English, e.g Maddison goes to Maddie. I usually keep this suffix as is, because I don’t like modifying the pinyin of names. (Unless you want “Qing’er” to become something like “Qingie” haha)
- A-: This is a common addition to single character names. It strongly hints peasantry in general, the poorer farmers. Not quite so in modern times though.
- (Older) Sis: This is an endearing way of addressing older girls (younger than 25 I’d say) by a younger girl. Think of this as the “-neechan” (Japanese) honorific. I did not keep it in pinyin (“-jie” or “jiejie”) to avoid confusion of Chu Beijie’s name. There doesn’t seem to be many cases in Gu Fang where an older girl calls a younger girl, a “(younger) sis” (“meimei”) anyway and it’s easy to figure out when they do. When two girls say that they’re like “sisters,” that means they’re best friends. Funny how a lot of people don’t get along with their blood-related sisters, even in China.
- Brother: Could be younger or older. Could be blood related or not. “Bro” is a bit too informal in this case (not that “sis” isn’t, but “bro” doesn’t quite picture familiar but somewhat formal relationship).

### **Addressing Oneself**

- Own name: Some people address themselves in third person, e.g. Pingting may say, “Pingting only wants...” Unlike Japanese, this is not quite as “cutesy”, and is very often used to create a historical setting by Chinese to show modesty.
- Own title: Often the King may use something like “guaren”, the officials may use “chen”, Chu Beijie uses “benwang” to address themselves. These literally mean their own title. However, it isn’t as straightforward to us English speakers, therefore I usually just translate it as “I”.

# Book Six

## *"Their Respective Paths"*

### Chapter 55

The Songsen Mountains were a natural barrier, separating the two countries, Bei Mo and Yun Chang.

The small village was at the foot of the Songsen Mountains. If you were to judge by territory, this place belonged to Bei Mo but was too remote. There's no military use since it was far from any checkpoint. The village residents often went into the more remote parts of the mountains to gather herbs and hunt, not caring about Yun Chang or Bei Mo.

*The Songsen Mountains are ours.* A-Han would often chuckle as he yelled this.

Gazing far into the distance, he could see the year round gleaming snow. It looked cold and pale in the sunlight, like a diamond. The seed of spring seemed to have been sown in the village, because there was a large grass plain in the east, as if its young grassbuds were joyfully stretching out their arms.

Spring had arrived and shouts of life were everywhere.

"The sheep sure sound happy." A-Han happily rushed outside in the early morning. His voice was unrestrained as always as he cheerfully carried a chicken. "Missus, my family has quite the fat chickens. I'll prepare one for your baby to eat."

Yangfeng walked out from the building, putting a finger to her lips and shook her head. "A-Han, you always forget. You'll wake the sleeping baby again."

A-Han suddenly remembered and sheepishly scratched his head. "Heh, how did I forget again? I often wake my little A-Han too."

Yangfeng took the chicken from his hands, smiling, "Madam Pingting stepped out, but do come in."

"And Brother?"

"He left with Weiting for the mountains, said they were going to hunt in exchange for rice and oil."

Ze Yin and the others came to stay and organised the hunting & herding. Because of A-Han's acquaintance with Pingting, A-Han often came to visit. His personality was straightforward. It was fortunate he wasn't nosy to ask their reasons. Seeing Ze Yin's age, he called him Brother. As for Yangfeng, she was his sister-in-law of course.

"I don't need a seat. I still have to go see the horses."

“Ah, don’t leave yet.” Yangfeng stopped him and turned to go into the room. Not long later, she came out holding a small paper bag. “Aren’t there blisters on A-Han’s wife’s hand? Take these herbs and boil them for her to drink.”

Having mentioned his wife’s blisters, he frowned in distress. “Herbs are useless. She has had a lot already, but the swelling remains. It’s so painful she can’t sleep at night.”

“These herbs will be different. Let me tell you, Madam Pingting picked these from the mountains.”

A-Han widened his eyes. “Madam Pingting can treat illnesses?”

“She knows many others too. She isn’t a genius doctor, but she will be much better than that Doctor Lou when it comes to treatment.” Yangfeng stuffed the medicinal bag into A-Han’s hands and reminded him, “It’s enough to be happy when she recovers, but don’t proclaim it everywhere.”

“Understood. Madam Pingting said that many times. I won’t tell anyone! Sister-in-law, I’ll take these herbs. If they really are useful, I will bring another chicken over.” A-Han took the herbs and suddenly turned, slapping his forehead. “Look at me! I’m so stupid! To think I forgot my wife’s instructions.” He took out a bag from his arms. “There are two articles of clothing here, both sewn by my wife. It’s a bit rough, but the material is strong. One is for Aunt’s Qing’er and the other is for Madam Pingting’s baby.”

Yangfeng received the clothing and eyed the smaller one first. A smile lifted in her lips, “It’s too small; the shoulder width won’t do.”

“How long could the shoulder width of such a small thing get?” A-Han was somewhat disappointed, “Try it anyway, maybe it’ll fit.”

Yangfeng led him into the room with a small wooden cradle. She compared the clothing to the precious baby. Indeed, it was a little too small. “See, the shoulder width isn’t enough. It doesn’t matter though, I’ll just unpick it and fix it with another piece of cloth.”

The little baby lied in the cradle, sleeping peacefully. Its face was white and tender, and its nose rose straight. Other babies tend to tussle and turn whiel sleeping but he slept as straight as a pen, tidily.

A-Han studied him carefully, chuckling, “This baby has a nice face. Who knows how many girls he’ll swoon when he grows up. Changxiao, long laughter and laughing every single day. Huh, Madam Pingting sure chose an interesting name.” Seeing Changxiao sleeping well, he couldn’t help reach out to tease him with one finger. Changxiao felt someone touch him in his dreams and unhappily twisted his neck. His eyes did not open while his chubby hand moved, tightly holding onto A-Han’s finger.

“Ah, he certainly isn’t weak.” A-Han smiled in delight, “He will definitely become a great hero in the future.”

“Of course.” Yangfeng’s smile was faint as she lowered her eyes to look tenderly at the sleeping baby.

Changxiao, Chu Changxiao.

His father was the world famous Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Fengyin stayed in the Prince Consort Residence, taking over Pingting’s room and Pingting’s qin. The people of the Prince Consort Residence knew the Princess and the Senior Official protected her in the shadows and therefore did not dare treat her as a servant.

As long as Yaotian wasn’t around she was naturally the other mistress of the Prince Consort Residence.

“What else?”

“And...” Fengyin frowned as she pondered, “it seems that the Prince Consort has taken in a homeless man, who seems to be from Gui Le.”

“From Gui Le? Who? What’s his name? What’s his origin?”

Fengyin shook her head. “I’ve only vaguely heard them saying it once. I don’t know anything else apart from the fact he is definitely a man of Gui Le.”

Gui Changqing glanced at her in disappointment. He sighed, “The greater power He Xia holds, the more disturbed my heart. It’s a pity that the Princess does not listen to my advice. Fengyin, you must do everything to help your foster parent.”

Fengyin nodded. “Father in law, don’t worry.”

“How does He Xia treat you?”

“He remains very polite to me and also tells the lower servants to attend to me properly.”

“Does he like to listen to you play qin?”

“He never asks me to play qin.”

“When you get back, continue to play qin in that room every day. Your skills at qin are superb and won’t go to waste.”

Fengyin held her words back, carefully raising her eyes to peek at Gui Changqing’s pondering expression. She finally couldn’t help but ask, “Why must I do this? Every time I play qin in my room, the Prince Consort always becomes a man of few words.”

Gui Changqing asked, “Do you know who owned the qin that you’re using now?”

“I know. That qin belongs to Bai Pingting.”

Bai Pingting, still Bai Pingting.

Why did her name remain remembered and longed for despite being long gone herself?

Gui Changqing lightly replied, “That is a prick in his heart. Tug at it periodically so he will be deeply reminded. This is Yun Chang and the only decision maker should be the Princess. Whoever the Princess wants alive, they will be alive. Whoever the Princess wants gone, they will be gone. This is the code of royalty.”

The military-specific granaries were established under Yaotian’s approval, contributing immensely to He Xia’s power in the government.

The King of Dong Lin had died of illness and the Queen succeeded the throne. The army of Dong Lin lost its Duke of Zhen-Bei and completely rid of its former pride.

He Xia, having been dormant for so long, naturally couldn’t let a great opportunity to pass. With the military advantage of grain and money as well as being in the season abundant of horses and crop, he requested Yaotian to assign troops to him

“Is that...proper?” Yaotian frowned, putting down the fruit she had picked up to play with again. She looked at He Xia.

He Xia’s handsome features broke into a smile as he returned Yaotian’s gaze, “What part does Princess feel is improper?”

Without waiting for Yaotian’s reply, Gui Changqing who was quietly sitting aside smiled as he said, “My Yun Chang’s national policy has always been about self-sufficiency, no dispute nor attack. Only by looking after the peasants can the country prosper stably.”

Yaotian’s expression revealed her agreement.

He Xia was quiet for a moment before sighing, “This is a major event. No need to make a quick decision. During the assembly tomorrow, Princess can discuss and negotiate with the other officials. Does this sound good?”

Yaotian had been afraid He Xia and Gui Changqing would clash when facing each other. She hurriedly nodded and gazed at Gui Changqing, “What does Senior Official think?”

He Xia’s proposal played Gui Changqing right into his hands. He had the support of numerous civil service officials in court. Gui Changqing had always preferred civil service over military. A few military officials resisted his authority, but none are able to challenge him in court. “Prince Consort is right; this is a major event that should be discussed with the rest of the officials. Princess should decide after that.”

The matter of war was finally temporarily set aside. The two people discussed a few more national affairs, but each had their own priorities to attend to hence asked Yaotian to retire.

Yaotian watched the two people go into the distance and heaved a sigh of relief. The conflict among the Prince Consort’s and Senior Official’s factions was intensifying in the darkness. It was tense enough to explode at the slightest trigger. They were similar in so many ways, yet together they were troublesome.

She rested a while before hearing the sound of footsteps. They sounded somewhat familiar.

Yaotian raised her head in surprise, “Why did you come back, Prince Consort?”

He Xia smiled softly towards her. He walked to her side until he stood with his shoulder beside hers. His gaze was fixed somewhere beyond the window as he said, “I was originally planning to return to the Prince Consort Residence, but halfway there, I suddenly thought of a few words and couldn’t help walking back to see Princess.”

Yaotian curiously asked, “What important words did Prince Consort think of?”

“In my heart, these words are indeed important.” A tiny smile escaped from He Xia’s lips as if immersed in a happy memory. His tone was a little wistful as he sighed, “It’s a pity Princess has forgotten.”

Yaotian couldn’t help scooting closer and softly say, “How should Yaotian know which words Prince Consort is referring to if he doesn’t say them?”

He Xia was silent for a while before slowly saying, “On our wedding night, I promised Princess that one day I’ll personally crown the Princess as the Queen of the Four Countries.”

Yaotian’s heart was trembling, her voice lost. “Prince Consort...”



“These words were heard and understood, yet why has it come to this?” He Xia looked at Yaotian with a bitter smile, “But if Princess really wants a Prince Consort who sits around and does nothing all day, I’ll definitely won’t disappoint Princess.”

“Prince Consort...”

He Xia’s eyes were like stars as he calmly said, “That was all I came here to say. Princess is the sole master of the country so Princess should make the decisions about major affairs of Yun Chang by herself.” He bowed politely to the Princess before then casually striding off.

That night, Gui Changqing wrote twenty-seven personally written letters to be delivered to the governing offices of various cities. They planned to speak out against He Xia’s military plan in court.”

He hadn’t expected seeing Yaotian arrive, seat herself on the throne, and announce her Order with great authority. “Dong Lin is my country’s greatest enemy. Since the enemy is weak, we must take opportunity and attack before Dong Lin has enough time to breathe. Prince Consort.”

“Here.” He Xia’s voice was clear as he stepped out.

“For Yun Chang’s peace in the future, I, the Princess, commands you to lead the troops to crush Dong Lin. Effective immediately, the rights to command three of Yun Chang’s regiments fully belongs to you.”

The officials who had long prepared a bellyful of good reasons to refuse hadn’t expected Yaotian making an Order first thing that morning. Their expressions instantly turned surprise. Every one of them stared at Gui Changqing.

Gui Changqing paled to purple. Just when he was about to step out of line to talk, he heard Yaotian’s cool voice again, “It hasn’t been long since Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen Bei led troops to invade my Yun Chang. If all we do is seek security, we may not be able to keep the peasants safe. Officials, don’t forget to learn from our past mistakes.”

This point was spoken resolutely and decisively. Everyone understood Yaotian’s determination. The inside of Gui Changqing’s heart went cold and could never take that one step he had planned. He ground his teeth as he looked at He Xia receive the flag of command. Everyone knew the affair’s conclusion had been set and was irreversible.

When the assembly finished, He Xia and a crowd of generals briskly strode away from the hall, hungrily longing for war. The civil service officials filled in the gaps of a circle around Gui Changqing, their expressions very upset.

“Senior Official, you see...”

“Senior Official, such an important affair of sending troops should not be executed so sloppily.”

“Senior Official, should you not enter the Royal Residence and discuss with Princess herself?”

Gui Changqing shook his head, not saying anything. Without caring for the surrounding crowd, he got on the carriage alone. He returned to the Senior Official Residence and his younger son, Gui Yan, hurriedly came to the door to beckon him into the room. Once he had closed the door, he asked, “Father, did the Princess really make her Order, allowing the Prince Consort to lead troops to attack Dong Lin?”

Gui Changqing’s face was gloomy. He nodded and glanced at his younger son. “He Xia formally took the flag of command and can mobilise all of Yun Chang’s army, including the Yongxiao Regiment under your command and the Weibei Regiment under your second uncle’s command.”

The two were silent when the sounds of heavy footsteps were suddenly heard out of the room. They were clearly impatient

Gui Changqing said, "Must be your second uncle."

He had yet to finish his sentence when the door to the room opened. The tall figure blocked more than half of the sunlight in the room. Gui Changning stumbled forwards and raised his voice, "Brother, I heard the Princess has given her order, allowing He Xia to lead troops to attack Dong Lin?"

Gui Changqing nodded, his face very grave.

Gui Changning's expression revealed joy instead. He laughed, "Finally attacking Dong Lin, how refreshing! It's a pity that I went out to train the soldiers and only returned to the capital just now, missing the scene when the Princess made her Order."

For generations, the Gui family were important officials of Yun Chang. In this generation, Gui Changqing was in charge. He had recommended many civil service officials but only recommended two military officials in contrast. They were respectively his second younger brother, Gui Changning, and his younger son, Gui Yan. Gui Changqing understood his brother's personality and warned him with a glance. He sighed, "What good can war do? He Xia already secretly loathes us but can't do much about me during assemblies. I'm afraid he now has full control. He will mobilise your two regiments to the very front..."

"I'm only afraid that he won't mobilise me. How could I be afraid when I have a few techniques in defeating the enemy?"

Although Gui Yan was a military official, his thoughts about people were much deeper than his second uncle. He contemplated for a moment before saying, "Father is afraid that now He Xia has power in his hands, mishap might happen to Second Uncle at the frontlines. It is true a single arm cannot defend against four fists. Why not do this, if He Xia does mobilise Second Uncle's Weibei Regiment to the frontlines, I too will ask for Yongxiao Regiment's mobilisation. He Xia can't do anything to the uncle and nephew that lead two major regiments unless he dares command the other regiments to surround and siege us."

"No, that's far too dangerous. What if..."

Gui Changning sneezed and waved his hand. "Brother, don't worry. I reckon the most dangerous thing that could happen is not to mobilise our troops. He'll take the troops, destroy Dong Lin, and return with all the glory. Our Gui family can only stand aside, watching."

He had a straightforward personality and his words certainly weren't wrong.

Gui Changqing studied the two. Gui Yan lightly nodded his head, apparently agreeing with his second uncle's perspective. Gui Changqing thought for a while and sighed, "Since it's like that, all we can do is cross the bridge when we get there. To be honest, it's no good if we aren't able to communicate with the generals in the army with He Xia's expedition. However, my younger brother," he turned to look at Gui Changning, his expression very serious, "As your older brother, I tell you that this expedition is different from previous times. During the outing, you must not..."

"Drink alcohol right." Gui Changning's bushy eyebrows frowned once and he gritted his teeth, "I won't touch alcohol at all during this expedition. If I do, I won't be a son of the Gui family."

"You must remember it. Don't drop your guard and lapse into your old habit again."

Gui Changning thumped his chest. "Brother, don't worry. I won't mess up on the important things, even though I'm sloppy on the details."

Gui Changqing cherished his clever younger son, yet he refused to be a civil service official but had to lead troops. Gui Changqing gently looked at him and sighed, “At the frontlines, don’t be blinded by victory and jump into battle at any given chance.”

Military officials were different from civil service officials. They were generals who fought on the battlefield and weren’t decided by family backgrounds or qualifications, only those with skill were admired. Annoyingly, He Xia’s combat and strategic skills were superior and won the majority of the army general’s loyalty in a short period of time. Otherwise, what had the Gui family had to worry about it, being so entrenched in Yun Chang’s powers?

Gui Changqing’s heart was miserable. He got up and opened the room’s door, allowing a breeze to waft in. A trusted manservant stood at the other end of the corridor who Gui Changqing beckoned to. “Has the Princess sent anyone to summon me?”

The manservant peeked at him and cautiously answered, “No.”

Gui Changqing’s expression became even more sour as he stood outside the door for a few moments. He instructed, “You may leave. Immediately notify me whenever there’s news from the Royal Residence.”

The battle horses had been fattened and the war drums would soon thud.

He Xia had full control of the army in his hands. He had the flag of command, grain and money with no restrictions by the government.

Dear Princess, are you really betting on Yun Chang’s future with this?

With the flag in He Xia’s hand, he mobilised the army the very next day. He understood that despite losing the Duke of Zhen-Bei, the Dong Lin army the Duke of Zhen-Bei finely tuned should still not be underestimated. He Xia’s bold spirit seemed ready to mock the heavens as he mobilised all of Yun Chang’s seven regiments, Gui Changning’s Weibei Regiment and Gui Yan’s Yongxiao Regiment included amongst them.

An auspicious day was chosen and the Princess personally sent off the Prince Consort from the capital gates.

Yun Chang’s peasants were gathered at the base of the city wall, eyeing the Prince Consort’s silver-white armour above. His appearance was like a general from the heavens in the mortal world. Everyone was full of praise.

“Look at how mighty our Prince Consort is!”

“Dong Lin will know our Yun Chang is not to be trifled with.”

“Beat them to pieces so the world will know our Yun Chang is not to be bullied!”

A year earlier they had been pressured by the furious Dong Lin army to the point of being unable to lift their heads. Today they were finally able to express all their anger.

Even Yaotian, the one who had decided to mobilise the troops, hadn’t expected the peasants who had been living peacefully up til now to be so supportive of this expedition.

Yaotian blessed He Xia with a cup of wine and scanned the tightly-packed crowd below her. She softly said, “All the peasants know Prince Consort will return in triumph.”

He Xia laughed as he asked, “Then what about Princess?”

Yaotian looked at He Xia, “No matter what happens in the battle, Prince Consort must come home safely.”

He Xia studied Yaotian, his eyes as bright as the stars in the night sky. It was almost too difficult for people to look directly into. He Xia didn't reply but gave Yaotian a confident smile as he turned to unsheathe his sword.

*Clang!*

The sword had been tempered numerous times came out of its scabbard, glinting fiercely as it arrived into the sunlight. The reflections of dazzling light shot out, causing momentary blindness to the crowd of peasants. In their dimness, all they could see was He Xia's standing figure bathed in light, daring and arrogant.

“Long live the Prince Consort!” After a few moments of silence, a huge roar erupted. It instantly spread to everyone.

“Long live the Prince Consort! Long live the Prince Consort!”

“Long live the Prince Consort!”

From the neat rows of standing troops to the howling peasants below the city walls, none were silent.

He Xia tossed his head back and laughed for a long time, his handsome figure displaying a greater hint of arrogance. He sheathed his sword, went down the city wall and got onto his battle horse. He rode once around the army, causing everyone to see his figure. When he raised his hand, his audience silenced immediately.

He was no longer the Prince Consort nor the Marquess of Jing-An.

He had become Yun Chang's powerful hope and symbolised the spread of royal values.

He Xia's eyes slowly swept across the huge army that was about to conquer the world with him. The corners of his mouth lifted into the slightest smile as he shouted, “Depart!”

Just a single word set the entire army of a hundred thousand in motion.

The sound of hooves thundered, kicking up a dust cloud so thick that the humans within could not be seen.

Yaotian watched He Xia leave in high morale, her hands pressed at her heart as if feeling empty. She stared until He Xia's back view disappeared into the distance.

The capital was left far behind, only the endless yellow-mud plains stretched before their eyes. He Xia rode at the very front of the huge army when he heard hurried hooves from behind. Dongzhuo rushed forwards, staying closely beside him as he lowered his voice to report, “Everything Master instructed has been prepared.”

He Xia didn't turn his horse nor did his eyes leave the distance. He nodded slightly.

“Dongzhuo, clench tightly onto the sword in your hand.” He Xia turned his head, glanced at the magnificent army. A trace of cold laughter flashed in his eyes. “We really will see blood this time.”

Dongzhuo turned back as well, glancing at the “Weibei” and “Yongxiao” flags fluttering high in the sky. His hand on the sword hilt couldn't help tighten once.

He was familiar with his Master's tactics. When he wasn't attacking, he was completely uninvolved, but when he did, he struck like thunder, not leaving any room to spare.

That was the Marquess of Jing-An's true character

## Chapter 56

When horses were fattened, sheep flocks were also doing well. The rainwater this year was decent, and the grass on the plains grew non-stop. The sheep, cattle and horses did not lack food so herding was comfortably done, as any random place would do.

Ze Yin was a man who had led armies to war so he was both strong and unafraid of hardship. He led Weiting grow food and look after the livestock, while Yangfeng weaved some cloth during her free time. They were self-sufficient and life was laid-back.

“Changxiao can walk now.”

“Walk? I reckon he could run the moment his feet hit the ground. He’s always wriggling; you have no idea how hard it is to catch him.”

Pingting had given this child the right name as he indeed liked to laugh.

Yangfeng was delighted at the sight of him every time. “He’s always in a jolly good mood, I wonder what he’s laughing about?”

Pingting scooped tottering Changxiao and pointed at his nose, blaming, “Geez, your walking is unsteady enough; no need to run. How many times do you need to fall to feel pain?”

Ze Qing tugged at the corners of Pingting’s clothing. “Carry.”

Yangfeng hurriedly pulled her son to one side, holding back her laughter. “You’re still young and shouldn’t haul Changxiao at your pace. What if you drop him?” She shook her head before looking at Pingting. “I reckon you ought to let Changxiao and Qing’er become brothers. He truly loves to stick to Changxiao.”

“Why bother? They’re always together and look like actual brothers to anyone.”

“How could they possibly look like actual brothers? Qing’er looks plain silly while Changxiao was born with a hint of dominance. Look at those eyes and that nose; he’s literally a tiny...” The title, the Duke of Zhen-Bei was stuck in Yangfeng’s throat, leaving her sentence suddenly cut by a lack of voice. She knew she had said the wrong thing. Her heart was uneasy as she raised her eyes to look at Pingting.

Pingting had been teasing her son when her face had paled. It was a long time before she smiled bitterly, “Not just his eyes and nose, but his expression too.” She poked at her son’s tender nose, unsatisfied as she whispered, “What’s wrong with looking like Mother? Why must you look like that person?”

*My son, do you know of the Duke of Zhen-Bei?*

*The Duke of Zhen-Bei’s name is Chu Beijie.*

He could wield a heavy sword, capture the enemy general’s head from the middle of thousands of soldiers, and held the power and influence to conquer the world. Those will ill intentions would shiver in his presence.

He was intelligent, courageous, and dauntless - an unchallenged famous general on the battlefields.

*He should be in the Dong Lin Royal Residence, right?* When autumn passed and the days of winter arrived, there would be a grand celebration in honour of his birth.

*The sixth, I remember.*

*His birthday was the sixth.*

Yun Chang's army was threatening Dong Lin's borders, jolting the Dong Lin Royal House awake from the peaceful dreams, realising how insecure Dong Lin was without Chu Beijie. The Queen of Chu Beijie immediately retrieved the flag of command and commanded Chen Mu to lead the army opposing He Xia.

But the enemy general leading the troops to attack was He Xia. Whether it was the Queen of Dong Lin or Chen Mu in charge, both knew that it was a war with no hope.

When He Xia arrived at Dong Lin's borders, he immediately summoned all of the major generals and threw out their first task.

"The report of returning spies mention that enemy advisor Chen Mu is now on his way and Dong Lin's reinforcements will soon arrive here. My army must hold its ground. First conquer Yan Lin City. Which one amongst you will be willing to gain this first victory?" When He Xia finished speaking, he smiled as he scanned the familiar military generals around him.

Military generals fought for reward, so who didn't want the first victory? Several of the younger officials seemed eager, but Gui Yan opened his mouth the quickest and stood out from the row to speak, "Gui Yan is willing to help Prince Consort capture Yan Lin City."

He Xia seemed to have long expected that he would be the one. He listened with his head slightly inclined before gently asking, "Does Junior General Gui know who is currently guarding Yan Lin City?"

"Yes, it's one of Chu Beijie's ex-subordinates, Luoshang."

"Yes." He Xia nodded briskly, his expression inscrutable. "Luoshang is a mighty general fully tuned by Chu Beijie. He's a very fierce defender and has a significant amount of troops himself. Junior General Gui's Yongxiao Regiment may not be able to capture Yan Lin City. Sending out the Weibei Regiment alongside might be good too..."

"No need." Gui Yan flatly refused, his voice quite proud. "I have already sent mines to confirm the enemy's status. The Yongxiao army is twice more than the defending troops at Yan Lin City, enough for a siege. He's merely just a Luoshang, not a Chu Beijie, so what need is there for my second uncle to attack?"

Gui Changning deliberately agreed with a few grunts before raising his coarse voice to speak. "Such overkill, like killing chicken with a cattle gun. There's no need for two of my Yun Chang's regiments to attack a tiny city like that, otherwise the army of Dong Lin will mock Prince Consort."

He Xia saw the uncle and nephew echoed each other but didn't appear angry. He only agreed, "Fine then. I'll just wait to celebrate for Junior General's good news."

Gui Yan gained a chance of meritorious service. He remembered his father's repeated warnings and couldn't help be a little more suspicious. He submissively gestured and said, "Prince Consort, before I lead the army to attack the city, I have a small request."

He Xia asked "What request?"

“In the case that something unexpected happens and reinforcements needs to be sent from the main camp, please let my second uncle lead them, Prince Consort.”

He was young and fit so his request was full of meaning. With this, he was obviously worried that the main advisor He Xia was planning to harm him and did not trust the other generals either.

The rest of the generals had long been impressed by He Xia’s famous demeanour and were not particularly pleased towards the Gui family that opposed He Xia at any chance in the courts. Listening to this, each and every eye narrowed in study at Gui Yan, a person who had shot up to the rank of a Junior General thanks to his family.

He Xia’s broad-mindedness was unexpected by all. He pondered and said, “Such a small request, I’ll promise you that much.”

Gui Yan easily received He Xia’s promise and couldn’t help feel a little bewildered. When the rest of the generals finished discussing military affairs, each scattered. Gui Yan and Gui Changning left together. Gui Changning mused while walking, “I didn’t expect him to be so easy to talk to. No, to such a tiny city like Yan Lin... the Yongxiao regiment is more than enough. What need is there for reinforcements? All he’s done is make us owe him a favour. Yan’er, you better put on a good show for everyone to see and bring glory to our Gui family for once.”

“Of course.” Gui Yan chuckled. After thinking for a moment, his expression changed to stern. “I’m not afraid of ten thousand, just afraid of a single if. Second Uncle, I will lead the troops away, but you must be more careful back here. You mustn’t...”

“Drink alcohol right.” Gui Changning angrily looked at him, “Am I that untrustworthy? I promised your father that I wouldn’t drink alcohol and drag everyone down. Don’t worry!”

The next day, when the sky had yet to lighten, Gui Yan led the army under his jurisdiction, the Yongxiao Regiment, towards Yan Lin City.

Gui Changning was rather worried as they were family after all. He personally sent him out from the main camp. He lowered his voice, “Luoshang is a person who trained under Chu Beijie. In case of an abnormal situation, don’t try to be brave and immediately send a messenger to report to me.”

Gui Yan nodded, a confident smile appearing on his young face. “And when successful, I’ll immediately send a messenger to report to Second Uncle too.”

Gui Changning laughed. “Go, I’ll be waiting for your good news.”

Before dawn, the sky was darker than night. Gui Changning watched Gui Yan and his horse disappear before making back to the camp.

The camp’s several other unrelated regiments were still at rest while a few tiny squads were on patrol.

Gui Changning thought there wasn’t much else important today apart from waiting for the news from Yan Lin City, so he went back to catch up on some sleep. On the way back, he took a path through the barracks of his trusted troops until he stepped into his army tent, casually tossing his heavy armour onto the bed before opening his mouth to yawn.

A hand came from behind, silently and suddenly covering his mouth.

“Mmfmm...”

Gui Changning widened his eyes. He too could be considered a seasoned veteran of the battlefield. He stretched a hand to touch his waist. He had yet to touch his sword's hilt when the back of his head was thumped once. The culprit had knocked his head hard and he was quite strong, causing Gui Changning to jolt twice before collapsing onto the ground, unconscious.

Once he had fallen, the attacker revealed himself. He was dressed in black, his face covered with black cloth, only revealing a pair of eyes flickering in the dimly lit military tent. He studied the collapsed Gui Changning on the ground, his eyes unmistakably revealing disdain. He checked Gui Changning's breathing before pulling out a few bottles of decently aged wine Gui Changning had carefully hidden. After taking out a bag of sedatives from his sleeve, he poured it into the wine bottle and shook it, letting the sedatives mix into the alcohol.

"This cup is dedicated to your brother, Yun Chang's Sir Senior Official." The culprit murmured this. His voice was crisp and apparently He Xia, the highest ranked advisor in the camp controlling three regiments.

He Xia helped the unconscious Gui Changqing up, tilted the bottle and forcefully pried his mouth open. He detested the Gui to no end and showed no mercy by filling Gui Changqing with around nine bottles before putting him back on the bed and leaving in a waltz.

*Bada, bada, bada bump!*

"Please send reinforcements!"

By noon, a fast horse galloped inside from outside the camp. The rider was wearing Yun Chang's military uniform and drenched in blood. When he reached the camp entrance, he raised his head and howled, "Please send reinforcements! General Gui Yan pleads for reinforcements! Pass...the message on quick..."

The guarding tent all knew that he was one of Gui Yan's trusted guards and were surprised. They hurriedly opening the entrance to let him through.

When the rest of the generals heard the news, they all hurried to the advisory tent.

"Please send reinforcements! Please send reinforcements!" The manservant entasked with the message hurled inside. He fell with a thud the moment he entered, breathing heavily as he reported.

"Prince Consort, my army was ambushed by the Dong Lin army outside Yan Lin city. The situation is critical; Can Prince Consort send in reinforcements!"

He Xia guessed that much ages ago, yet his face revealed surprise. He took two steps forward, urging the manservant with his question, "How could this be?"

"It's an ambush! General Gui Yan had only just led us nearby Yan Lin City when two sets of Dong Lin troops charged toward us in unison, causing my army to be attacked from both the front and rear."

"Ambush? Whose troops?"

"The ambushing troops were led by Chu Mo Rang."

"What is the current situation of the battle?"

"Dong Lin had set up landmines and has more people than my side. My army wasn't able to counter fast enough, so casualties are dangerously numerous. General Gui led us and fought a bloody battle to a temporary standstill, retreating with our remaining brothers to Heng Lian Mountain's valley. Right now they are fiercely defending the



valley's mouth. General ordered me to fight my way through to bring back the message. Prince Consort, the enemy is pressing on and our brothers can't put up against them for long so please send in reinforcements!"

Now that the first troops sent against Dong Lin ended in ambush, all of Yun Chang's generals looked very grim.

"Immediately send reinforcements!" He Xia cut the tension right there and scanned the people in the tent, "Hm? Where is General Gui Changning?"

Quite a few generals already noticed Gui Changning was absent. Now that He Xia asked, they beckoned the soldiers to look for him. A general asked, "Why hasn't General Gui Changning come yet?"

A soldier who just came from General Gui Changning's tent replied, "General Gui is dead drunk and won't wake no matter how much I call."

Gui Changning was an alcoholic and notoriously famous in the army for that. Listening to the soldier's words made the crowd frown.

"Let's go see."

He Xia led the crowd of generals to General Gui Changning's tent. When he pushed open the cloth door, a huge whiff of alcohol was caught in their nose.

They saw bottles here and there, all of which were empty. Gui Changning's body was enveloped in the scent of alcohol. His limbs were sprawled over the bed, his snores like thunder.

The manservants beside him were drenched in cold sweat and constantly used white cloth to wipe his square face. Their voices were anxious, "General, General, wake up! General Gui Yan needs reinforcements!"

He Xia lowered his voice, "I promised General Gui Yan if he needed reinforcements, only General Gui Changning could lead them. What shall we do?" He commanded Gui Changning's man servants, "Hurry up, splash him with cold water and use any plan possible to wake him!"

The servants understood the situation was dire too. They hurriedly brought the water and splashed, wetting Gui Changning's head and face.

But how could Gui Changning possibly wake up, being an old alcoholic forced to drink so much in addition to sedatives? His snoring continued.

The messenger who desperately fought his way out to pass the message had been a close confidant of Gui Yan from childhood. He secretly blamed his generals' second uncle for being a disappointing man and threw himself at He Xia's feet. He begged, "Prince Consort, there isn't time to spare. Please send another general then!"

He Xia's handsome face also revealed a trace of anxiety but continued to shake his head. "A gentlemen's promise should always be kept, not to mention a main advisor? General Gui Yan was intelligent enough to think in case of trouble and requested only General Gui Changning could lead reinforcements. He must have his own reasons for doing so. Since I've agreed, I can't take it back."

The anxious servant was almost in tears. He turned to the bed and forgot all social conventions associated with hierarchy, slapping Gui Changning's left and right cheeks several times. He howled, "Wake up! Wake up! My god, do you really want my Junior General's life?"

Gui Changning received several blows but he remained asleep although the snoring stopped.

None of the generals ever had a good opinion of Gui Changning. Everyone suspected his high rank as a general was only thanks to his prolific family. Seeing him like this made them disapprove of him even more.

That servant could no longer do anything about Gui Changqing and was in full despair. He knelt before He Xia's feet once more, each kowtow booming, booming, against the floor. "Prince Consort, Prince Consort, my general's life lies in your hands. Prince Consort, I beg you, please send reinforcements!" He then turned towards the other generals, "All generals, I beg you. At the valley's mouth, Dong Lin's arrows are coming down like rain. All of them are Yun Chang's brothers. Generals, I beg you to take pity and convince Prince Consort to..."

This man forced his way out. His body was covered by blood-stained dust. With such a hard kowtow, blood flowed to every corner of his face, causing him to look very frightening indeed.

All the generals had been toughened up by war. Although they were rather contempt towards Gui Changning, they couldn't help feel respect for this mere servant.

He Xia saw all of the general's gazes on him and knew the battles in the future were to be done with them. He couldn't afford to refuse too bluntly. He considered the group's opinions once more and didn't wait for someone else to start talking when he whispered his question, "Which general is willing to go out and rescue them?"

Everyone exchanged looks and soon after, General Qing Tian of the Shuitai Regiment, stepped out. "I'm willing."

"Fine, then General Qi should immediately lead troops out to rescue General Gui Yan."

Rescuing was as finicky as putting out fires. A lot of time was already wasted from attempting to wake Gui Changning from the alcohol. Qing Tian obeyed orders and immediately left to prepare his troops.

A little under half an hour, Shuitai Regiment departed. A soldier came into the advisory tent to report, "Prince Consort, General Gui Changning has finally woke up."

He Xia and several worried Yun Chang Juniors were still discussing military affairs. When He Xia heard the report, he replied coldly, "Do tie him up for me."

A few of his close confidants immediately went into Gui Changning's tent. They grabbed the general who had just woken up and viciously tied him up. They had been instructed by He Xia beforehand to firmly gag him with coarse cloth, so that he wouldn't lower the army's morale with his screams.

Gui Changning's own confidants all knew what was happening. They knew the Prince Consort was furious and didn't dare to stop him. They simply weren't shameful enough to do that, so they just watched their general be tied up in silence.

In the afternoon Qing Tian returned, covered in dust.

He returned with Gui Yan's tattered body as he reported his status to He Xia. "I went a step too late. By the time we arrived, the Dong Lin army already retreated and the Yongxiao Regiment annihilated. General Gui Yan died on the spot."

A dozen arrows stood out from Gui Yan's corpse. It looked so terrible that even the witnesses in the battle couldn't bear imagine how devastatingly fierce it was.

"If he listened...If the Yongxiao and Weibei Regiments went together, this couldn't've happened..."

He Xia was painfully silent for a few moments before he began to rage, "This first confrontation caused the annihilation of one of my army's seven regiments. How am I to explain this to Princess? Someone, bring Gui Changning!"

Gui Changning was pushed in, tied up and gagged. He had been tied up the moment he woke up and he had absolutely no clue of what had happened. At first he had planned to seethe his bubbling anger out at He Xia, but he didn't expect the cloudy, dark atmosphere in the advisory tent. Everyone's expression were more twisted than ever. The scent of blood hung in the air. A corpse was placed on the floor. It was wearing a blood-soaked uniform of the Yun Chang army.

Upon closer inspection, his head seemed to buzz hard, driving him senseless.

"Gui Changning, as an important general of Yun Chang, in charge of the Weibei Regiment, what do you have to say about ignoring military orders and drinking till drunk in your tent, delaying rescue squads that caused the entire Yongxiao Regiment to be annihilated?"

He Xia gestured. His soldiers took out the gag from Gui Changning's mouth. Gui Changning stared at his nephew who was still alive and kicking just a moment ago. The world in his eyes began to spin. He felt like lightning repeatedly striking his head. He gaped, whispering, "How...how did this..."

He Xia shouted, "Gui Changning, do you admit your crimes?"

Gui Changning's whole body shook and abruptly raised his head. "No, I didn't drink, I didn't drink alcohol! I'm innocent!"

The other generals had personally seen him sleeping on the bed with the strong scent of alcohol. Seeing him deny reality on the spot made them feel deeper contempt. Their eyes couldn't help show disdain.

"How dare you deny it? With such an incident, I dare not see Princess unless you are killed. Someone! Execute him!"

Gui Changning saw the situation and realised that it was dire. He yelled, "I'm innocent, I didn't drink! My Gui family has been important officials of Yun Chang generation after generation. The accomplishments for Yun Chang are numerous. He Xia, you can't kill me! I'll confront you in front of the Princess!"

"In front of the military flag, as well as the commander of three regiments, isn't good enough to kill you?" He Xia laughed coldly. He raised his voice once more, "Someone, take him away."

His soldiers had prepared to do so already. They took out the wrapped up rice parcel-like Gui Changning. Not long later, a rather angry looking Gui Changning head was raised.

There was a general who asked, "The battle of Yan Lin City has ended in defeat, one of Yun Chang's seven regiments is gone too. How does Prince Consort plan to attack the Dong Lin army from now on?"

"We won't attack the Dong Lin army."

"Prince Consort means..."

"We're going back to the capital."

The generals were all stunned, but Dongzhuo already knew He Xia had other plans before them all so he simply stood with his hands at his side. His expression was like usual.

“Now that one of the seven regiments has fallen thanks to Yun Chang’s internal conflict rather than the Dong Lin army’s strength, doesn’t this suggest now is not the time to attack foreign soldiers?” He Xia continued, “A mere Dong Lin is nothing to me. Everyone here is full of ambition. I wonder if you are willing to accompany me to tidy up internal conflicts first before sending troops out to conquer the world.”

The people were all intelligent and immediately understood what He Xia was planning. Everyone knew He Xia had been the Prince Consort for a while, yet the Gui family had done everything to oppress him. Now that such a huge incident occurred, cleaning up the Gui family was a given.

The tent was silent.

He Xia smiled, “Don’t worry. If you have anything you wish to discuss, feel free to say it.”

This single plan eradicated the military power of the Gui family. Now he rode on its momentum. His eyes were solemn and humble as he gazed around, sending everyone’s heart thumping.

“Wasting sweat or blood is no matter. We generals are just afraid that we stand around idly. Locking us up in a town with nothing to do is fine. Prince Consort can decide everything else.” Qing Tian pondered for a moment before summoning up his courage to speak first.

His thoughts coincided with the other generals’.

The Prince Consort was obviously planning on putting the Gui family back in place, but what had it to do with them? The generals were simply afraid that there wouldn’t be war, the scent of blood. Gui Changqing always nags with his prudent policies that always clashed with the military side. If Prince Consort, an acclaimed general, was completely in charge, it would be a good thing for the army.

The crowd exchanged looks and made their decisions before showing submission to He Xia. In unison, they said, “We will all listen to Prince Consort!”

“Good.” He Xia nodded reservedly, “Then generals, let’s immediately depart and return with me to the capital.”

Yun Chang, Qierou City.

It was the season of willows but the season had nothing to do with the room. Whether it was winter or summer, all that could be seen were four walls and a window.

The lock device began to clang, and the figure walking inside was still Fanlu.

“Why aren’t you eating again?”

“Don’t feel like it.” Dishes had been placed tidily on the table, but it seemed completely untouched. Zuiju was sitting on the bed, her head lowered to tidy the clothes on her lap.

Fanlu hesitated and then whispered, “Never mind then.”

He let the matter go so easily, causing Zuiju to be surprised. This man treated her like a pig- keeping her locked up in a pen and feeding her food without end. If she didn’t finish her food, numerous things would happen until she was forced to eat everything. Why did his personality suddenly change?

“Hey...”

Fanlu stopped. "What?"

Zuiju walked over, assessing him with a glare. "What happened?"

"It's none of your business." This was what Zuiju always said when angry, but Fanlu countered her with it.

Zuiju was surprised for a moment. Then she harrumphed, "Trying to act cool? I won't ask then." She went back to sit on the bed and continued to tidy up her clothing while asking, "Hey, even if you don't dare release me, at least let me write a letter to my Teacher. You could say I'm begging you here, but don't forget, I saved your life." Hearing a sudden clang, Zuiju abruptly raised her head to find that Fanlu had already left. The door was locked once more. Zuiju was furious, "That bastard, there'll be a day when I'll applaud at the wolves who eat him."

Zuiju went back to tidying her clothes, putting them into the cabinet.

The imprisoning room wasn't entirely unchanged. The bed cover sets were occasionally changed. All of the patterns were chosen by Fanlu. They were fairly good. A few months ago, Fanlu carried in a cabinet for clothes. Following that, a dressing table, jewelry boxes, rouge and other makeup liquids and powders were collected.

With a hanging mantle, wind chimes, bronze mirrors, green screens, and silk quilts, it was a lady's bedroom except for the metal chains and lock on the door.

That man came and went, leaving behind a little something every time. He never gave them directly to Zuiju, he just mocked her a few times until she was furious. She'd only notice a silver hairpin on the table or a doll by the wash basin when his back view had disappeared out the door.

She'd been locked up for ages now and sick of it. She was dying to see living beings everyday, even if they were an evil person like Fanlu. In the last two days however, Fanlu hurriedly came and went, leaving once food had been served. Zuiju had no idea what was going on and couldn't help feel uneasy.

*Clack.*

The door swung open again. Zuiju raised her head.

Fanlu strode into the room, slumped down in a chair. He didn't speak, just looked at Zuiju.

Surprised, Zuiju asked, "Why'd you come back?"

## Chapter 57

The battle of countering the old forces was played fast and excitingly. Several hundred thousand soldiers tightly surrounded the capital while Yaotian panicked over finding herself pregnant. Her pregnancy helped He Xia immensely. He had an excuse to send the esteemed Princess into the depths of the Royal Residence or put under house arrest and forbidden to interfere with complicated national affairs any more.

Within a few days, a document containing Gui Changqing's signature admitting treason was brought before Yaotian. Soon after, he was displayed on Yun Chang's city wall alongside many other traitors and the rest of the Gui family so the peasants could recognise their crimes.

"Never expected that the Senior Official would really "

“The Gui family has always held positions of authority generation after generation, yet why are they all traitors this time?”

“Human hearts are unpredictable, very unpredictable indeed...”

The evidence steadily surfaced without end and everyday someone would report of the Gui family’s treason. Now that the almighty Senior Official admitted treason, what did these utterly oblivious ordinaries know what was true or false?

Not to mention, the Dong Lin army controllers were disadvantaged in this expedition. The two disappointing generals from the Gui family, one trying to flaunt and the other an alcoholic, ended the lives of an entire regiment of several thousands.

How could anyone who sent their sons to a brutal death in war not bitterly detest these generals who cared nothing for their subordinates?

But fortunately, in such an occasion of national crisis, the Prince Consort demonstrated excellent military organising abilities by rapidly weeding out the traitors. Not only that, he re-appointed all ranks within a very short time frame. Less than a month later, the passionate atmosphere that caused the peasants of Yun Chang to be so patriotic was seen once again.

Flags flapped in the sky while a hundred thousand set off.

The Prince Consort, brighter than any light they’d ever seen, once again led the army on an expedition.

“The world is vast but there is no place where my Yun Chang can’t reach!” On the city wall platform, He Xia slashed with his sword.

The Princess’ dignified figure was no longer seen by He Xia’s side. She was deep in the Royal Residence, pregnant with Yun Chang’s future king.

The soldiers’ bloods raged regardless, and they jumped for joy.

They cheered for He Xia, raged for He Xia. Because, they had a hero.

Gui Le once had He Xia, Dong Lin had Chu Beijie and Bei Mo at least had Ze Yin. But today, Chu Beijie’s whereabouts were unknown, and Ze Yin retired to seclusion.

Yet He Xia now belonged to Yun Chang.

With He Xia, there was no place where the Yun Chang army couldn’t reach.

What was much more surprising though was that when He Xia had led the troops out of the capital, he commanded the entire army to set up a camp just after fifty miles. He summoned all of the generals into the advisory tent for a meeting.

Once everyone had all arrived, He Xia immediately said, “The army shall change direction, not heading towards Dong Lin.”

These people had already gotten used to his odd, twisty-style of thinking a while ago, so they weren’t too surprised. They simply asked, “If not to Dong Lin, then where are going?”

“From now on the army shall split up and travel at night. We’ll meet at Bei Mo’s borders.”

Everyone seemed to understand he was planning to attack Bei Mo first.

Attacking Bei Mo first was right. Although the Dong Lin army no longer had Chu Beijie, even tattered ships hold power in their heavy metal nails. They weren't easy to defeat. The Bei Mo army wasn't that strong in general, not to mention they no longer had Ze Yin. War was like eating persimmons where you always had to choose the softest first.

Qing Tian had several experiences of expeditions. He pondered for a while and thought of a question that could not be ignored. He submissively asked He Xia, "Prince Consort wants us to attack Bei Mo which is totally fine. However, Dong Lin is my Yun Chang's utmost enemy while Gui Le is also eyeing on all of us. What if we fight against Bei Mo and the other two countries decide to join in the battle, causing us to be attacked from three sides?"

"No one wants to be attacked by three sides. That's why Bei Mo definitely doesn't expect us to suddenly attack them."

He Xia lightly laughed, "Don't worry, Generals. I naturally dare challenge Bei Mo because I already have plans to wipe out the Bei Mo army rapidly. Dong Lin is currently administrated by the Queen. When it comes to battle, women are always hesitant and never make their mind. By the time she has set her mind on attacking us, the Bei Mo army's power would already be completely wiped away by us."

The crowd wasn't quite as courageous as He Xia. "Once we've wiped away Bei Mo, we still have to counter Dong Lin. How could we possibly have the resources to stop Gui Le?"

"That's the most interesting part." He Xia looked proud. He raised his voice. "Zhaoxing, come in!"

The flap lifted and crashed. A thin military general strode in. He acknowledged the generals before standing by He Xia's side. He looked fairly calm.

He Xia introduced, "Fei Zhaoxing is Gui Le's General Le Zhen's most trusted confidant. He was the one who notified the ambush prepared by the King of Gui Le last time." He raised a hand and lightly gestured at Fei Zhaoxing.

Fei Zhaoxing lowered his voice. "The Queen of Gui Le asked me to bring the message to Prince Consort in secret. The King of Gui Le had planned to ambush Prince Consort's men. As long as I write a letter and get someone to send it to the King of Gui Le, informing him about the Queen of Gui Le and the Le family, the infrastructure of Gui Le will completely collapse. They wouldn't have time to care about the battle between Yun Chang and Dong Lin."

The General of the Weimo Regiment was curious, "The Queen of Gui Le's Le family is completely devoted to Gui Le. Why would she actually send a private report to Prince Consort and betray the King of Gui Le?"

Fei Zhaoxing simply replied, "To stop Bai Pingting from entering the Gui Le harem."

The generals were relieved.

Hearing Bai Pingting's name, He Xia's eyes darkened. He was silent for a long time before the colour returned to his eyes, "Fei Zhaoxing's private letter is already on its way to the capital. The King of Bei Mo isn't suspecting us at the slightest while Dong Lin is momentarily fearful of us, so they won't fight again so easily. Everyone, now is the best time to conquer Bei Mo."

He Xia's plan was carefully and meticulously arranged. At first the generals couldn't dare believe what they had heard, but now the colour of joy had returned to their cheeks. They shouted in reply, "Always listen to Prince Consort's instructions!"

All traces of the Yun Chang army were suddenly lost. No one knew where they'd gone.

“Waaah...waaahhh...”

Pingting hurriedly walked into the room. She saw little Ze Qing placed on Yangfeng’s knee, his little bum revealed. Her hand moved up and down as she slapped the tender skin.

“Yangfeng, what are you doing that for?”

Yangfeng’s anger was apparent. She reached out a hand to point at the ground, “Look what he dragged out from underneath the bed. Not only that, he was playing it with Changxiao. What would we do if he hurts Changxiao in the process?”

Pingting lowered her head and became shocked to see a sword shining on the floor. “These two children are far too naughty. Changxiao, you need to be punished too.” She pulled the standing Changxiao down too.

Changxiao still couldn’t speak. He looked quite chubby, his eyes bright and clear. He simply just grinned when he saw his mother returned.

“Yangfeng, don’t hit Ze Qing any more. I bet it was Changxiao at fault. Don’t judge him by his small size. When he walks and runs, you have no idea how much of a rascal he is.”

Ze Qing’s little bum was struck a few times. He was like Changxiao, didn’t like to cry so he immediately wriggled out onto the floor when his bum no longer hurt. Yangfeng struck a few times. It hurt her heart dearly, so all she could do was helplessly let him free.

“Ah...smile...smile...” Once Ze Qing had gotten onto the ground, sprinted away from the mother who had painfully struck his bum, heading straight towards the merry Changxiao. He grabbed a hold of Changxiao and dashed outside, declaring “Bamboo, bamboo...” He was much faster than Changxiao at running, so Changxiao jumped and staggered, dragged out of the wooden door.

“Ze Qing, you are not to shake the bamboo poles of the clothes line.” Yangfeng chased them out of the door, “Let go of Changxiao and take care so he won’t fall.”

“Yangfeng, it’s fine.” Pingting walked to a stop behind her, placing her hands on her shoulder. She smiled, “Look at that anxious look on your face. Don’t worry about Changxiao. Just let children fall so they may grow.” She turned and picked up the sword on the floor.

It was a fine sword. The blade was like water. Just one slight shake was enough to quiver sunlight with its chilling glint. Pingting flipped the hilt and as expected, the words “Divine Spirit” were carved into it. She couldn’t help but become silent. After a while, she asked, “Why does the Divine Spirit Precious Sword that once shook the world so many times remain here in the dust? Such a pity.”

Yangfeng turned around to see Pingting staring at the sword. Her heart leapt. Chu Beijie came up onto the mountain, received the news of Pingting’s death and soon after left utterly dejected. She hadn’t told Pingting that Chu Beijie left the precious sword, Divine Spirit, behind. She had stuffed it under the bed. Perhaps it was a trick of fate that those two brats fished it out. She thought for a while and lowered her voice, “Chu Beijie left it behind. He once came here to find you.” Seeing Pingting silent, Yangfeng couldn’t help add, “Pingting, do you still miss that man?”

Pingting didn’t reply, just stood in the room. Several moments later, she slowly slid the sword back into the scabbard, hung it, and turned to go outside. She called, “Changxiao, come, come, your mother will like to sing a pretty song for you.” On her delicate face was a doting smile.

“Mo mother!” Changxiao giggled as he nounced forwards



"I'm listening too!" Ze Qing was always by Changxiao's side. He forced a spot by Pingting before Changxiao.

The sun was shining. Tiny ripples stretched across the surface of a pond at the front of the small hut.

Someone was softly singing.

"When there is trouble, there are heroes; when there are heroes, there are beautiful women; surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil..."

*My son, your mother holds a story in her heart.*

This story had heroes, beauties too.

The beauty and the hero once swore to the moon, to never turn against each other.

To never, ever, turn against each other.

The song was gentle and touching, full of love from the heart and anger from the mouth. Although the two kids didn't understand the deeper meaning in it, they listened quietly, enraptured. They sat by Pingting on the threshold.

Before the song finished, Ze Yin's figure suddenly appeared on the other side of the fence. He hurried in, his expression looking very dark.

Pingting immediately stopped singing when she saw Ze Yin's expression. She stood up, imploring, "What's wrong?"

Ze Yin's expression remained dark as he shook his head. He was closely followed by Weiting. Both of their expressions were extremely twisted. None said a word as they strode into the room.

After a wet nurse was called to take the two kids to another place to play, Ze Yin closed the door before lowering his voice, "The King is dead."

Yangfeng was taken aback by this. "The King has always been healthy, so how could this be?"

"It's He Xia." Weiting painfully replied, "He Xia sent an invitation to the King to meet at the borders for a banquet. Yun Chang and Bei Mo have always been allied by friendship, so the King didn't suspect anything and just went..."

"That villain He Xia, he actually dared to poison the wine. They were also ambushed by armed soldiers, causing the King and his accompanying officials and guards to be killed instantly. The message has now spread throughout the country. Everyone is full of panic." Remembering the many favours between himself and Bei Mo, a tiger-like general such as Ze Yin couldn't help his eyes turn red with tears.

Yangfeng's face was full of disbelief. "Is He Xia crazy? Now that the King is dead, the Bei Mo army protecting nearby will suddenly command to attack."

"The Bei Mo army definitely doesn't dare to immediately attack." A crisp and decisive voice was heard from behind them.

The three people turned back. Pingting was standing by the table. She thoughtfully added, "Since He Xia dares murder the King of Bei Mo, then he must have enough troops to finish off the Bei Mo army, even if they're driven by revenge."

Ze Yin froze at the thought. “If Yun Chang dares to fully attack Bei Mo, then Dong Lin and Gui Le won’t just sit around and spectate. Does He Xia dare to fight in a three-way war?”

“Main General, you’ve never fought against He Xi, correct?” Pingting pursed her lips, not sure whether to resent or to sigh. She whispered, “On the battlefield, he will never do anything he isn’t sure of.”

“Then should we send someone immediately to Ruo Han, to tell him to be careful?”

“...It’s too late...”

Fei Zhaoxing’s one private letter seriously intensified the conflict between the King of Gui Le and the Le family.

The matter regarding Bai Pingting was one that couldn’t be publicized, so the King of Gui Le found a random excuse to banish the Queen to the Cold Palace.

But the Le family’s power in Gui Le had already taken root and became very difficult to clear. Elder Statesman Le Di had long prepared for this. Before the King could take action, he made his smartest move ever. He raised his son Le Zhen to become the Main General. Before the King of Gui Le could order an attack, his son left the capital to take the soldiers on training.

Like that, the Gui Le king remained inside the capital while Main General Le Zhen took of the majority the soldiers outside. When the two finally clash, it would be quite the sight.

The Gui Le Royal Residence was caught in the shadow of civil strife, so even when the news of the King of Bei Mo’s assassination was reported, no one cared about who He Xia was attacking.

Of the four countries, Dong Lin was most anxious over He Xia’s actions.

“Please do discuss this.”

In the Royal Residence of Dong Lin, the Queen of Dong Lin was seated at the throne. She nervously glanced at the silent officials below her. “You have read the military report, so don’t tell me you don’t have anything to tell me? Generals and Officials, please discuss it.”

Chen Mu sighed. He hardened his resolve and stepped out. “Madam, my words remain the same. If He Xia dares attack Bei Mo’s army, then the next one he’d attack is us. Time is precious. We must immediately send the army to join forces with Bei Mo to counter Yun Chang.”

“Absolutely not.” Chu Zairan’s hoarse voice rang out.

The Queen’s two princes had been murdered by the plotting of the King of Bei Mo. She really didn’t want to help Bei Mo out of their crisis. Hearing Chu Zairan’s words of disagreement, she busily added in a warm voice, “What does Senior Official suggest. Please do tell me.”

However, Chu Zairan walked out unsteadily. He raised his head and spoke, “Madam, our Dong Lin is no longer like the old times. If we still had the Duke of Zhen-Bei, what need is there to be afraid of He Xia? But now, the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s traces are all gone. I reckon that He Xia mustn’t be provoked, so don’t provoke him.”

Chen Mu urged, “He Xia is ambitious. Even if we don’t provoke him, he will still make a move on us. The Duke is gone now; my side is weak, so all the more reason for us to take the initiative. We must collaborate with the army of Bei Mo against He Xia to be able to protect ourselves.”

“Soldiers are fierce, and war is dangerous. The only way to survive is to protect ourselves.”

“The only true way to survive is to attack now.”

“If you have words, speak clearly and slowly. Senior Official...”

“After the battle between the Yun Chang and Bei Mo armies, they need time to recuperate. We can use this time to carefully train...”

“Don’t be too hasty, let us carefully discuss...”

“Discuss what? If we wait for He Xia to conquer Bei Mo, Dong Lin will become the next target. I’m afraid that the enemies will have already reached us before training has even begun!”

“Stop quarrelling!” The various officials in the hall debated without rest. The Queen scanned from left to right, then back again. Unable to bear it any longer, she slapped the armrest, causing all of the bickering people to quieten instantly.

“Sending soldiers to fight is an important national affair; it mustn’t be a hasty decision.” The Queen of Dong Lin rubbed her temples and sighed, “We must think about this again and continue discussion tomorrow.”

Chen Mu’s eyebrows furrowed. He impatiently took a step forward, “Dear Queen, we mustn’t hesitate any longer. The Main General of Bei Mo, Ruo Han, has already launched attack. He Xia’s tactics are never without loophole so I’m afraid that in just a few days, the entire Bei Mo army will be annihilated.”

The Queen of Dong Lin was slightly angry. “Did I not say to think for now and continue discussion later? General Chen, don’t say any more.” She stood up and hurried to the other side of the bead curtain.

The Queen of Dong Lin’s reaction was exactly what He Xia had expected. Without the threat of Gui Le and Dong Lin, He Xia freely moved all of the military forces to attack Bei Mo.

What happened next shook the entire four countries.

Under the foot of the Songsen Mountains, in a place known as Zhouqing, the Yun Chang soldiers appeared to have formed from thin air or drilled out from the ground, assembling into a strong army. They raised the head of the King who died such a painful death, the enraging the grieving Bei Mo soldiers. Under He Xia’s meticulous planning and command, this decisive battle became an unprecedented massacre.

The Yun Chang army completely annihilated Ruo Han’s troops and casualties in the Bei Mo army were numerous. Less than a tenth managed to escape with their lives.

And that was Bei Mo’s hugest and most important military force.

The Battle of Zhouqing once again proved He Xia’s outstanding military skills.

Following that, He Xia’s forces rapidly expanded beyond all imagination. After defeating Ruo Han’s army, He Xia proceeded to annihilate Bei Mo’s other reinforcements at the speed of light. They then turned their gazes to Dong Lin who missed their only chance.

Yun Chang’s warriors never thought taking over the four countries would be so easy. The victories caused their morale to boost even higher

After several hundreds of blades, they managed to cut open Dong Lin's checkpoints. In the midst of gushing blood, He Xia's flag always flew in the very front.

In the eyes of the soldiers that followed him, he was like a god of war.

The blood seeped into several hundred miles worth of land. Yun Chang was the centre of the shadow of war, spreading in all directions as they advanced their army bit by bit.

The Bei Mo army was annihilated. Even the corpses of Bei Mo's Royal House ceased to exist.

The Dong Lin army was annihilated. General Chen Mu was killed in battle while Moran led the remainder to protect the Queen of Dong Lin as she left the Royal Residence.

The captured Senior Official, with his elderly long white hair, was humiliated. He committed suicide by poison before Yun Chang soldiers broke into his house.

No one thought that He Xia could do all this in such a short period of time.

"The army of Yun Chang is coming! Yun Chang's army is coming!"

"Run! Have to run..."

"Daddy! Daddy, where are you?"

Bones were left everywhere on the muddy plains. Defeated soldiers and fleeing peasants were scattered throughout. Everyone scrambled to be first, afraid of being left behind. Others steadied the old and pushed the young in a desperate attempt to escape.

But who could possibly be faster than He Xia's battle horse?

## Chapter 58

The war spread. Even remote villages were not spared.

The grief over the loss of the King was weaker as the cloud of He Xia's conquest hung over these people who lived by the day.

"I announce, the Prince Consort of Yun Chang has given his Order. The peasants in each village will be counted and every person must give three bags of grain. This is to be paid in full in two days, without delay."

The gathered villages started panicking.

"Three bags per person, then how are we to last through winter?"

"He doesn't want us to live!"

“Mayor,” someone grabbed onto the elderly mayor who had just finished reading the Order. He cried, “You know the daily life of my family. My wife is sick so all grain has been swapped for medicine. I’m not able to give just one bag, not to mention three.”

The mayor was frowning too. He lowered his voice, “What can I do? The several children in my family count too and I’m distressed over the grain too. Luo-boy, we have to pay up or else, because they’re tribute to the army. If it’s a bit late, they’ll have your life. Those Yun Chang soldiers kill without batting an eyelid.”

Luo-boy’s eyes felt sour. He rubbed his eyes and slumped, “When our King was still around, we were never required to pay three bags of grain all at once. He Xia, hmph, why the hell did He Xia conquer our Bei Mo?”

“Do you value your life, daring to mention the King?” The mayor looked anxiously at their surroundings after muffling his ragged cuffs around his mouth. He warned, “Just be obedient. We don’t even know where General Ruo Han has fled to, so don’t try to overestimate yourself, okay?”

While he was speaking, the sky-shattering thudding sound of hooves were heard, and the crowd jumped back in fright. Everyone’s head swivelled to look outside the village. They saw the flag of Yun Chang soldiers surging forwards from the distance.

“What happened? Is there anything wrong?”

The soldiers reached the village entrance and pulled their horses to a stop. The villagers looked up, momentarily blinded by the sword blades dazzling in the sun.

“Who is in charge of you?” The one in front studied the mayor, “Do you already know about the Prince Consort’s Order for grain?”

“Yes, yes, it’s been read.”

“Did anyone make trouble?”

“No, no. We are all good peasants.”

“Okay.” The captain grunted and dragged out his following words, “You Bei Mo people were supposed to be our Yun Chang army’s slaves, but Prince Consort has given mercy, leaving you to supply resources for the army. You are to properly grow crops and look after horses. The Prince Consort has also issued boundary placements. From now on, if the village finds any outsiders, they must be immediately reported. If you dare conceal and not report him, this village will be disposed according to rebellion. Is that all clear?”

The mayor was very frightened. He hurriedly nodded and forced a laugh, “Yes, yes, it’s all clear. We are all good peasants, good peasants.”

That captain saw that he had been frightened to a tremble and couldn’t help laugh disdainfully. “Good peasants? Jiaokou Villiage fifty miles beyond here said that they were good peasants too, but they privately hid a few remnants of the Bei Mo army. The entire village of one hundred and seventeen was completely slaughtered by us. Hmph, I reckon we should put up a few bloody heads so that you know what real good peasants are like. Let’s go, my brothers.”

Luo-boy suddenly collapsed onto the ground, holding his head in his hands as he wept.

“Luo-boy, what are you crying for?”

“Don’t ask ” A few spectators sighed “His sister married into Jiaokou Villiage ”

Everyone grieved.

The country was falling.

Life and death was not a choice, just a matter of tolerance against suffering.

A-Han went past the fence with large, powerful strides, heading straight for the stone chair in the courtyard. He yelled at Ze Yin, “Brother, it’s no good. I can’t take it anymore. I want to become a soldier and attack that He Xia bastard! What kind of life is this? That much grain, where on earth can you get that much grain? If all that goes to keeping soldiers alive, then what about my woman and child?”

“A-Han, shut up first. Don’t ask for trouble.” Yangfeng hurried out from the building and ruefully glared at A-Han. She lowered her voice, “He Xia sent his Order. A person is awarded fifty-two gold coins for every rebellious person exposed. Be more careful or people will report you, shouting that so loudly.”

“Grain robbed, house ransacked and even the chickens are gone. What is there to be afraid of?” A-Han shook his head, “I’m not afraid of death.”

“Then your wife and child?”

“I...” A-Han’s neck stiffened. His shoulders fell in the end. “What use is there to live? They’re making it impossible for us to live...” His voice drifted off.

A strangled silence burst into the courtyard. Ze Yin had been silent all along, quietly wiping the hoe in his hand. It didn’t look much like a hoe but more like the sword the precious sword that had been by the Main General’s waist back then.

Weiting couldn’t help but walk over. He lowered his voice, “If this goes on, we’ll be forced to death. Why don’t we...”

“Why don’t we what? The army of Bei Mo has lost, so who else can defeat He Xia’s army?”

“Don’t tell me we’ll become prisoners of war and let our sons and grandsons bear the shame?” Weiting made his words harsher but pressed to lower his voice even more. “With General’s fame, if you go down the mountain now, you should be able to summon many with a single call.”

Weiting’s words seemed to evoke some old aspirations. Ze Yin’s eyes were suddenly a bit brighter. He trembled twice, his face tensing up. The change was only temporary like a shooting star that gradually dimmed away.

If he were to go down, he would indeed be able to gather several hot-blooded citizens of Bei Mo. However, even with several multiplies, it wouldn’t be enough to threaten He Xia’s army.

He wasn’t fighting against someone else, but He Xia.

He witnessed Chu Beijie’s strength and knew He Xia’s fame was just as equal. There wasn’t a chance of victory even if their military power was the same.

Not to mention that the gap between the armies was too wide.

It would be a massacre. He would be those Bei Mo peasants dissatisfied by the oppression into a massacre. That would be even more desolate than the slaughter in the Battle of Zhouqing.

“General...”

“Don’t say any more.” Ze Yin put down the hoe. “Bring the water and the food Yangfeng prepared. It’s time to go to the fields.”

The message was spread to the most remote of villages beyond the dark clouds, spreading terrified eyes and whispers.

The King’s only brother, Duke of Zhong-Tan, called the fleeing Bei Mo soldiers to assemble and fight against He Xia. Less than ten days later, thirty thousand people gathered. The army of volunteers were defeated by He Xia’s generals thirty miles away from the suburbs while the Duke of Zhong-Tan was caught alive. He was tortured and sentenced to death by being cut into pieces.

The retreating Dong Lin army amassed all of their forces and fought against Yun Chang once more, going against He Xia with a big bang. He Xia however used sly tricks, placing an ambush in the valley. The Dong Lin army once again fell and suffered many casualties. Their corpses were everywhere, and blood stained Dong Lin’s Fuzha River.

The cloud of danger now loomed over Gui Le. The army of Yun Chang pressed closer towards Gui Le’s capital and the terrified King of Gui Le was likely to surrender. Le Zhen who always kept an eye on the King of Gui Le noticed the situation wasn’t good. He promptly led the army away from the Yun Chang army by heading towards Gui Le’s borders.

Message after message countered He Xia’s victories and the Yun Chang army’s glory. Thanks to the immense pressure they needed to project, the army’s crushing demand for resources increased upon the peasants of the fallen countries.

At first they demanded grain but now each family must supply three pounds of iron so the army had the raw materials to build the weapons needed.

The market was in recession; the iron shop door was tightly closed.

The villagers were very worried.

“Fifteen pounds of iron. Don’t tell me they want us to give up our cooking pots. I refuse!”

“You refuse. Do you want to be like Luo-boy then?”

The poorest man of the village, Luo-boy, was unable to supply the grain so his skinny head was raised high up in the village. His sickly wife tied a noose the next day, suicide by hanging.

“If we give them our pots, then how are we to cook?”

“Do you want your life or the pots?”

“Even if we give the pots, it won’t be enough.”

The elderly mayor’s yellowed eyes watched his fellow villagers he known for so many years. His mouth slowly quivered out, “You must give that hoe too...”

“How could that He Xia...be so unreasonable?”

“He has an army in his hands ”

“What about our Bei Mo’s army?”

“Defeated. No one can defeat He Xia.”

“Why can no one defeat him, with the world so big? How is this fair?”

“I heard there was one...” A phrase floated amongst the crowd.

Their devastated eyes suddenly widened as their gazes pinned on the one who spoke.

“Who?”

The villager had only heard fragments of rumours. After thinking, he replied, “I think it was Duke of Bei something, something Chu maybe...”

“Then where is he?”

“About that...I don’t know...”

The people were disappointed. Their eyes gained glint of light instantly dimmed. Whether they were squatting or leaning against the wall, each were in silent daze.

Three pounds of iron required today. What about tomorrow?

Smashed pots and a used hoe was finally enough metal to hand to the soldiers. The sunshine seemed to be oblivious to the anger and depression. It just continued to shine down on the earth in high spirits.

Ze Yin was in the fields, sweating as he lifted and dropped the hoe. This was the only remaining hoe left in the house.

The King had died; the country collapsed.

Soldiers came and went, riding where they pleased and wrecking his effortful husbandry. It felt like Ze Yin’s heart had been burdered by a boulder. It was crushing his heart to pieces, crushing until it bled.

He was once the Main General and held the most military power in Bei Mo. He led a army of high morale and sworn to protect his country’s king and its peasants.

Yet now, the King died and the peasants were being trod on by other horses.

If his opponent wasn’t He Xia, if he didn’t have to worry about his wife and child, would he remain here silently waving a hoe, letting those violent soldiers snatch away his hard-earned results?

Yangfeng looked at him every night with worried eyes. Only when Ze Yin watched Qing’er and Changxiao- two kids who didn’t know sadness, just joy- did the boulder on his heart become a little lighter.

But when he turned away, the boulder would weigh heavily again until it almost seemed to suffocate him.

“Brother! Brother!”

Ze Yin raised his head, bean-sized sweatdrops all over his face. A-Han huffed as he ran from a shortcut. “Brother, Brother it’s terrible! Brother Wei has been caught by the soldiers!”



Ze Yin stiffened. He threw the hoe down and ran towards him, "Where is he?"

"He's outside the village on the hillside, next to the edge of the large meadow."

Not waiting for A-Han to finish, Ze Yin headed towards the village entrance.

Weiting, he knew Weiting.

That grumpy man, a man who wouldn't even look at his superiors' face in the past. He only knew how to strike, clench his teeth down and fight. His foul temper was stubborn too. Ze Yin deliberately asked him to go out on the grass plains so that he wouldn't be able to hear each and every one of He Xia's messages which all served as a death sentence for the peasants. Why did he run into Yun Chang's soldiers?

Ze Yin madly ran all the way to the slopes until his pupils shrank at the sight. On the ground, the grass was a mess, as if numerous people had trampled over it. There were bright red blood stains extending to the other side of the hill.

"Weiting!" Ze Yin cried as he went on the other side.

Weiting was lying on the slope, appearing to have rolled down from the damp blood tracks on the grass. Ze Yin rushed forwards, got on one knee, and helped him up. "Weiting, how are you?"

"They...they..." Weiting's head and face were swollen while the wounds on his body oozed blood. They were either sword or spear wounds. "...stole horse...and...sheep...I..."

"Don't speak, don't move." Ze Yin lowered his voice, "I understand."

Yangfeng and Pingting were shocked when Ze Yin carried back Weiting. The wet nurse hurriedly took the two children to another room while the two women divided the work to wrap up Weiting's wounds in bandages.

"Horse and sheep...all..."

"Don't speak any more." Yangfeng's gentle voice instructed Weiting, who was still struggling to speak. She sighed, "Stealing things is fine, but is there a need to beat him up like this?"

Ze Yin replied, "It's already quite good he's still alive."

Weiting lived in the same secluded residence and was like family to them. Once Weiting's wounds were properly bandaged, they left him to rest on the bed. The other people left the room, each in their own thoughts. Yangfeng boiled a bowl of porridge for Weiting. Since there wasn't much grain left, the rest of them ate yams for dinner.

After a busy day, it was finally time to rest. Yangfeng lay on the bed but couldn't get to sleep at all. She looked at Ze Yin, deep in sleep, before getting out of bed.

It was early autumn and the night breeze was extremely pleasant. She walked to the front of the house but caught a glimpse of the lonely figure in the courtyard, standing against the breeze.

"Pingting?"

Pingting slowly turned around.

In the moonlight, Yangfeng could see that the object she was holding in her arms. That sword, "Divine Spirit", fit to display on the walls, was now secure in Pingting's embrace.

Yangfeng went to her side.

“You can’t sleep either?”

“Is that person really missing?”

It seemed time united with the halo of moonlight. Under the halo was a face, same yet different.

Heroic, tough, overbearing, proud...

When attacking Gui Le, just one tactic was enough to ruin the House of Jing-An with a century’s worth of history. When attacking Bei Mo, just three moves were enough to disrupt the hearts of the Bei Mo generals. Whenever they heard his name, they would be plagued by nightmares. When he attacked Yun Chang, he shook the entire country from the Princess to the peasants. Everyone was anxious without exception.

Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie.

He was the heir to the throne of Dong Lin, a respected, widely acclaimed general. Each of the monarchs deeply feared him yet all traces of him disappeared when the Yun Chang army began poisoning the world.

“Pingting, you understand more about these things than I do. I just want to know if there is anyone who could possibly stop He Xia.”

“Master...sigh, He Xia...” Pingting deeply sighed and smiled bitterly. “I’m afraid that perhaps only one person could stop him and you understand who that is. Yangfeng, do you think I should...”

“No!” Yangfeng forcefully interrupted Pingting’s words. Her face was dismayed. She repeatedly shook her head, as if gone through the most painful nightmare ever experienced. It took quite a long time before she was able to calm down. She hung her head sadly, saying, “Don’t ask me. What difference is this to that day when danger was looming over Kanbu? I’ve been wrong once. I mustn’t make the same mistake a second time. Pingting, I swore that no matter what, I will never beg you to leave the mountains. Not to mention, he’s already been missing for a long time. Even if you go out, where on earth will you go to find him?”

Pingting listened and for the longest time, she was silent. She clutched onto Divine Spirit and returned inside. Changxiao was in the cradle, fast asleep. The moonlight gently scattered over his little face, printing the outline of his handsome features, the same mold as his father.

Pingting watched her son, smiling as she murmured, “Changxiao, Changxiao, do you know why I called you Changxiao? I hope that this little of face of yours will always be smiling and that you encounter things that will make you smile every day.”

“Dear son, I dearly hope you won’t fall for an intelligent woman.”

“Women who are too intelligent will always have a stupid fault. Once your heart gets knotted, you’ll never be able to undo it.”

“If she doesn’t like you, you will be upset; if she likes you too much, both of you will be distraught.”

Yun Chang, Qierou City.

“You lied!”

“What did I lie about?”

“You said you’d deliver it to Teacher. Fanlu, you liar!”

Fanlu easily grabbed Zuiju’s jade-like hand, who had been planning to thump his chest. He frowned, “How many times do I have to repeat till you understand? Dong Lin is currently like messy porridge, defeated soldiers and fleeing peasants are everywhere. Even the Queen of Dong Lin’s whereabouts are unknown. The messenger can’t even find your Teacher. Still hitting me? You still dare hit me? Oi, I’m going to fight back!”

Recently, his life hadn’t been too good. After the death of the Senior Official, the officials on He Xia’s side started to nit-pick on all of the ranking soldiers raised by the Senior Official.

One time the accounts weren’t adding up. Another time a report wasn’t written clearly enough. It was obvious they were trying to find fault with him, a city governor.

And here, because Zuiju knew about the mess in Dong Lin, her worries were numerous so she screamed nonstop. “Liar!” Zuiju’s two wrists were now both caught, so she could only use her raven-black eyes to glare at him.

“When have I lied to you?” Fanlu snapped.

“When have you told me the truth?”

Fanlu was dissatisfied. His face darkened, “Of course I have told you the truth before.”

Zuiju’s wrists began to feel uncomfortable, but her struggles did nothing to free them. Her face flushed with anger as she looked up to ask, “The truth? Hmph, when was that?”

Fanlu thought carefully and replied, “When I first talked to you, I said— Rumour has it that you’re not beautiful, but I think you’re not too bad. Yep, that’s definitely true.”

Zuiju was slightly stunned by this. The blush originally caused by anger now spread to her ears and soon it went beyond them. Even her neck felt hot.

She calmed down, only just realising that she was almost in Fanlu’s arms. She bit her lip, “Hey, let go,” she replied in embarrassment.

“Whose ‘hey’?”

Zuiju shot daggers at him with a glare until she saw the corners of his mouth lift. He had undoubtedly thought of another idea and she was actually a bit afraid of him being up to no good. She could only swallow her complaints, carefully saying, “Please let go of me, Governor.”

Fanlu began to smirk, pleased at himself, before loosening his grip. Zuiju withdrew her hands and noted that her wrists were red. That hateful man actually had quite a bit of strength. She gave him a reproachful glance and sat on the bed. Thinking of her Teacher amongst all those fleeing refugees made her heart worry and ache, causing her eyes to redden.

Fanlu saw that her head was lowered and was silent. He seemed to lose interest as she was usually so lively and reckless. He came and sat down beside her, “I’ll get someone to send your letter again and I hope he will find your Teacher.”

Zuiju shifted her body. “Don’t come so close to me.” Her voice was as light as mosquito

“What’d you say?” Fanlu asked loudly, taking a step forward until he was closer than before.

Zuiju abruptly stood up and stomped. “You...don’t you understand it’s improper for men and women to interact so casually?”

“You woman,” Fanlu stood up, several inches taller than her. His voice was rather commanding, “Don’t you understand that women always say something but want the other?”

“Who wants the other?”

“You! When I come nearer, you’re actually pretty happy, so why do you say something else?”

“I...I...” Zuiju was almost angered to tears and she continuously stomped. “When have I been happy? I’m still worried about Teacher and you just bully me...I should have just let you die on the Songsen Mountains so that the wolves could eat your stomach and your intestines...”

She had yet to finish when a huge figure had already filled her eyes, shocking Zuiju to close her eyes and take a step back. However, she hadn’t expected her waist to be tightly hugged.

Fanlu’s tongue slipped across her red lips like the heat of a fire.

“Ah...” Zuiju paled in shock. Her eyes were rounder than ever as she faced Fanlu’s hateful grin.

Fanlu loosened his grip and smiled, “Don’t think about your Teacher tonight. Think about me.” He waved a hand in front of the solidified Zuiju and left to deal with his documents.

Yangfeng walked into the room. The bed was already empty and Ze Yin was no longer to be seen. Her heart thumped slightly. She tiptoed deftly into the side room and peered inside. Ze Yin had his waist bent, rummaging through a pile of random old objects.

“What are you looking for?” She whispered.

Ze Yin stiffened. Quite a bit of time passed before he turned around and slowly straightened his back. In the moonlight, Yangfeng clearly saw his eyes.

They were eyes full of spirit.

But when those eyes display such liveliness, it meant their owner had made a very important decision.

A decision that could not be changed.

Yangfeng remembered the year Ze Yin –the King of Bei Mo’s messenger at the time- was sent to pay his regards to Gui Le. They met at Prince He Su’s Residence. She played a piece and raised her delicate hands to lift the curtain a little. In that moment, she had seen the very same expression.

Yangfeng’s heart felt like it was being hurled out.

After that, Ze Yin explained that he had decided that even if he offended the entire Royal House of Gui Le, he would marry her.

He wasn't particularly handsome and compared to the Marquess of Jing-An, he was not quite a romantic either. But he had black yet shining eyes, as if everything seen was taken to note and as if nothing in the world could make him hesitate.

"Husband, what are you looking for?" Yangfeng softly asked once more. Her heart ached with assumption and bewilderment as she carefully stepped closer so she could see Ze Yin's face better.

"I didn't find anything." Ze Yin's firm expressions flickered slightly before Yangfeng's direct gaze.

As Yangfeng gazed, she noted his rough hands had unobtrusively been clenched into fists. Yangfeng quietly watched him. She seemed to have penetrated his heart, gaining insight on every single secret.

They had been husband and wife for several years now, from escaping the King of Gui Le's side to seclusion to leaving the mountains into the Battle of Kanbu and back to seclusion...

The way to today had been a long journey. Now they had Qing'er. When they made the oath to live in seclusion forever, they had really thought they'd be able to keep it.

One was one of Gui Le's two famous qin players, the other was the Main General of Bei Mo. All of their past glory. They thought they casted everything behind, but once again fate swirled.

Only today, after this mutual staring under the moon, did they come to understand everything about the truly brief moment of time they had spent together.

"The box on the left," Yangfeng faintly replied.

"Hm?"

"Your sword, it's in the box on the left."

Staring at his feminine wife, Ze Yin's eyes suddenly began to heat up.

"Yangfeng..."

Slender fingers came over his mouth, stopping him. Yangfeng studied him closely as if watching him a lifetime wasn't enough, as if never having a good look at his face.

"It's good, Qing'er looks like you. His father...is a hero then." Yangfeng snuggled into her husband's warm chest, trying to feel his breath. She hardened her heart, straightened her back before turning away. "I'll wait for you."

She gritted her teeth and went out of the small room. She returned to the bedroom and sat down on the side of the bed. Her legs felt they could never find strength to move any more.

She wasn't tired. She just dazedly sat there. She sat, just like that, in the night like a stone statue.

She heard the sound of faint footsteps from outside the room. The sounds came closer and closer, each step pressing down uneasily at her heart until they could no longer be heard. Her mind began to spin with several memories. She continued to sit still as the moon leisurely sank and the sun slowly began to climb, the orange-red light revealing her tear-stained face.

"Yangfeng, it's time to get up." Pingting opened the curtain and saw Yangfeng's back. She was momentarily surprised before turning to see the empty bed. "Where's Ze Yin?" Her voice suddenly drifted.

“He left.”

“He left?” Pingting came a little closer. Yangfeng’s expression confirmed her suspicions. “Oh god...” Pingting took a deep breath of cold air, “Why didn’t you stop him? Did you make him swear to stay with you in the secluded residence? Didn’t you want him to not bother with that kind of thing anymore?”

Yangfeng turned to look at her. She looked devastated as she studied Pingting for a while. It seemed to make her a little more awake. She faintly smiled. “I have never liked him fighting wars to kill because it was all someone else’s thoughts. He fought for power, protecting the throne while the King of Bei Mo used him as a tool for murder, a doll with a sword. But I let him pick up the sword now because he did so for himself.” The morning breeze flickered past Yangfeng’s face, gently blowing her gentle fringe. “It’s something he wants to do. No one forced him, no begged him. It’s something he whole-heartedly wanted to do. I mustn’t stop him.”

Although her words were quite vague, Pingting understood. She sighed, “Then what about you and Qing’er?”

“Qing’er and I will live properly. He will be like his father, living according the way he wants to live.” Yangfeng grinned at Pingting. Her beauty was quite thrilling.

The sound of laughing came from outside. The two children had woken up. The wet nurse hurried and hugged one to feed him porridge.

Pingting accompanied Yangfeng for half the day before leaving quietly out the door. The sun began to lower while Changxiao and Ze Qing weaved in and out of the haystack, laughing without stop.

“Da...Daddy...” At night, Ze Qing strained his neck to look for the familiar figure.

Ze Qing habitually nodded, even when he didn’t understand anything at all. Not long later, he started rummaging around, wanting to find his hidden daddy. Changxiao also appeared out of nowhere and started to help.

The harsh militaries piled on, one after the other. Rice jars were gradually emptied. Perhaps in another ten days, the children wouldn’t have enough to eat.

Weiting lied on the bed, unable to move. When he was told that Ze Yin left, he summoned all his strength to nod but didn’t say anything else.

Like that, a few days passed. The army of Yun Chang’s behaviour suddenly turned and the higher-ups issued another order, saying to track down defeated Bei Mo soldiers. Each one caught would receive a large bounty and those who protected them would be punished.

The soldiers hurried here and back. Every time they would send the entire village’s hearts into turmoil. Everyone lived in fear.

Yangfeng and Pingting both began to worry for Ze Yin.

## Chapter 59

After Dong Lin’s capital was captured, He Xia sent soldiers to hunt down the remnants of the Royal House and generals. On the other hand, he ordered the Royal Residence of Dong Lin to be burned.

Thanks to the dancing fire torches of the Yun Chang soldiers, the capital of Dong Lin was enveloped by thick smoke while the bright flames in the Royal Residence dyed half the sky red.

“Royal Residence...the Royal Residence!” The peasants who remained in the capital raised their heads, their faces completely stained with tears as they watched the fire’s sparks and the sharp blades.

He Xia’s command to fiercely attack the remaining soldiers wasn’t just to vent anger. It was costly to sustain such a huge army. No country had ever had such a vast territory, so he had to press on quickly and decisively.

To destroy a country, one must first destroy its citizens’ confidence and trust.

The Royal Residence was burned down to flat pieces on the ground by the Yun Chang soldiers. To Dong Lin’s lucky survivors, it meant their confidence was disintegrating.

After all, it was a symbol of centuries of the Royal House that completely disappeared in a fire. To all citizens of Dong Lin, this was the final punch to their overburdened hearts.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei that had given them such a strong sense of security was missing so who did they have to pin their hopes on?

The bad news seemed to have grown wings, flying through to every corner of Dong Lin, making the trapped Dong Lin people even more desperate.

“King, what should we do?” The news travelled from a faraway place to where the remaining soldiers were reporting to the stiffly seated Queen.

More than half of the country’s land had been lost. The peasants had lost their homes while the Royal Residence was in ashes.

How did the once mighty Dong Lin fall to such a situation?

General Chen Mu had been killed in battle while Moran and Luoshang desperately protected her as she left the capital. Behind them, the sounds of killing shook the skies while the soldiers’ blood splattered over her adorned clothes.

Only then did she realise that the famous general Duke of Zhen-Bei was a treasure beyond gold. No wonder when the Dong Lin warriors mentioned the Duke of Zhen-Bei, their faces would reveal a delighted and proud look.

She was no longer a lady nestled safely deep in her residence. Now, she wore rough clothing, all excess magnificence removed. She was protected by the few remaining warriors of Dong Lin as she hid in remote wastelands or forests, avoiding the army of Yun Chang’s pursuits.

In the heavy darkness and anxiety for the future, the Queen often recalled the past.

Back then, Dong Lin held such power. The army was best adapted for war in the four countries, having the King and the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Where did the bad fortune start?

“Bai Pingting...” The name formed in the Queen’s mouth. She spat it out, the name that no one could ever let go of.

Bai Pingting made a move in Bei Mo, letting He Xia have a chance to intercept.

That day the famous Marquess of Jing-An, and later the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, conspired with the King of Bei Mo to poison her two underaged sons to death. It all foreshadowed the unfortunate state of today's Dong Lin.

The death of the princes caused Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting to suspect each other, but at the same time it may had them love each other more deeply.

When their love became deeper, the army of Yun Chang and Bei Mo arrived.

The Queen's heart froze. Had the Prince Consort of Yun Chang planned this chain of deadly traps that led her country to its demise?

Step by step, he made Chu Beijie lose Bai Pingting, made Dong Lin lose Chu Beijie and finally, removed all traces of Dong Lin off the map...

"Madam! Madam!" The sounds of yelling and hurried footsteps were heard. The simple carriage window flap was lifted, revealing Luoshang's extremely frantic expression. "We've found traces of the Yun Chang army in front, they seem to be heading this way. Madam, we must evacuate immediately. Hurry! Hurry!" He gasped for breath as he spoke.

Again?

A feeling exhaustion ripped through the Queen, but she could not allow herself to be captured because she was the Queen, the sole symbol of Dong Lin's Royal House.

The Queen clenched her teeth and slowly got up.

"The horse has already been prepared. Please immediately get on the horse, Madam. Moran will take some people to block for a while and will then hurry to meet up with us."

The Queen got onto the horse.

Domineering figures filled the horizon. The Yun Chang's calvary surged forwards.

Luoshang got on behind as a defending soldier. He whipped the horse and urgently pressed forward to escape into the night.

*Dear Pingting, if your soul is in heaven, please open your eyes to look at this messy world.*

*I'm willing to exchange all of the misfortunes you suffered for ten reincarnations of misfortune.*

*But please have mercy on us. For all these innocent peasants, return the Duke of Zhen-Bei to us.*

*He is this world's one and only hope.*

In a small remote village of Bei Mo, the day smelled a bit different than usual. It was quite strange.

"Want to listen to a story?"

"Listen to a story?"

"Outside...on the hillside...path...came a storyteller."



Everyone was whispering and would look around nervously from time to time, as if afraid that an armed Yun Chang soldier would suddenly emerge from the ground.

But everyone hid secrets and they all vaguely knew that this was no ordinary storyteller that spoke for fun. With slight expectation, they couldn't resist checking it out.

In such a suffocating troubled time, people needed a little bit of anticipation.

In the evening, a figure appeared on the hillside. At first there was just one but then another and another, carefully walking over. Gradually, even pairs and small groups of three began to arrive at a time.

Their faces carried fear, deeply afraid of being caught, but when they suddenly saw an acquaintance, their eyes would reveal the flickering light of surprise and following that, encouragement.

They had all gathered by the little patch of darkening grass and due to the obscured moon, they struggled to see. They vaguely made out the figures. There weren't just of men but women too.

"Ah, don't squeeze in."

"A-Han, you're here too?" Another familiar fellow villager whispered.

The sound of A-Han's doting laugh was heard in the darkness. "Of course, my wife is here too."

Someone hushed them. "Be quiet, the story is about to be told..."

Instantly it quietened down.

This was a fantastic storyteller. The storyteller sat on the grass. The crowd could only make out the outline of his body in the dim light as they waited eagerly and impatiently for the storyteller to begin, but no one spoke a word.

The storyteller cleared his throat. His voice was low and spoke in measured tones. Although it wasn't pleasant to the ear, it gave people energy.

"My fellow villagers, today I am going to tell you a story. I'll say this first that the events in this story happened not long ago and is a real incident. Those vicious Yun Chang people don't want to let other people know but we storytellers of Bei Mo who have lost their homes have heard of it. We have made it into a story and have been telling it in every direction. I know these days storytellers are executed every day, but storytellers are in endless supply. Once one has told to ten, ten will tell to another hundred. I'm not afraid of death and I am the same as the other executed storytellers. I just want all of Bei Mo's people to know of this story..."

In the darkness, the storyteller paused. He seemed to be collecting his thoughts together.

For some reason, the entire audience held back their breaths to keep silent, regardless of their usual rude, timid or indifferent personalities. They all seemed to know that they were about to hear some thrilling news.

"Our bitter life is all caused by a demon. This demon is called He Xia. He used to be Gui Le's Marquess of Jing-An and later the Prince Consort of Yun Chang. He was the one who killed our King during a banquet by poison, forced us to give up our grain, stole our horses, cattle & sheep and killed our loved ones. Our Main General Ruo Han led the army of Bei Mo to fight against him, but He Xia is a world-acclaimed general so Main General Ruo Han lost. Our Bei Mo army was defeated, which is akin to breaking the backbone of us Bei Mo people..."

When mentioning today's tragic situation, everyone's hearts fell, both furious and upset. They lowered their heads in sadness

The storyteller's tone was full of grief. Then he stopped, suddenly swapping to an excited tone. "But do you still remember our Main General Ze Yin? Back when he went into seclusion, Dong Lin's Chu Beijie arrived. He came out of the mountains and pushed Chu Beijie back home. Now that He Xia has come to harm our Bei Mo, how could Main General Ze Yin just sit and watch? My fellow villagers, the Main General has come out of the mountains!"

A ripple gently stirred the crowd. Everyone was suddenly impacted with the face of hope, the darkness in their eyes began to lighten.

"Main General, we still have a Main General..."

"Main General, where is he? Where?"

"Hush, allow me to finish." The entire crowd quietened with just a single word from the storyteller. Everyone was listening attentively again, "Main General Ze Yin is a general who can lead soldiers well. He knows Bei Mo's military power can't defeat Yun Chang's, and direct confrontation will only result in harming the few remaining soldiers of Bei Mo. The Main General can't do that. He said goodbye to his family and left the secluded residence. He knew He Xia was Yun Chang's main advisor, and without He Xia, the Yun Chang army would collapse. The Main General thought for a long time and finally decided to write a personal letter of challenge to He Xia."

The crowd gasped with an "Ah", which seemed to be a woman's voice.

The crowd were all anxious to hear the rest but A-Han wasn't too anxious about it. "He Xia has so many soldiers so if they all attack together, the Main General would definitely lose."

The storyteller replied, "No. Although He Xia is a demon, he is still a man with a rarely seen warrior's spirit and expert swordsmanship. The Main General sent the challenge letter to let the other generals know of his move on purpose. If He Xia didn't dare welcome the challenge or didn't face it head-on, then the other generals would look down on him. The Main General noted this very point, He Xia's high regard of himself."

"Then did our Main General...defeat He Xia?" A person in the darkness nervously asked.

The storyteller sighed. His sigh made the silence even more suspenseful.

"It's not easy. Although the Main General has fine swordsmanship, He Xia's is very fine as well. In terms of outcome, He Xia had a slightly greater chance of winning."

"Then...if there was no chance of winning all along, why did the Main General challenge him? Isn't that suicidal?"

"Yes...suicidal." This made the people who had guessed correctly sighed again. The storyteller lowered his voice, "Perhaps someone may have asked the Main General the very same thing. The Main General said back then, 'If I kill He Xia by luck, than Bei Mo must be blessed but if He Xia isn't killed and his life is ended, he will die a worthy death. Sigh...sigh...what a hero, our Bei Mo has our own hero...'"

He shook his head as he sighed for while, but everyone else was still concerned about Ze Yin's life or death. They impatiently asked, "Sir, please do tell us. What on earth were the results in that battle?"

"He lost." The storyteller spat out these words, causing all of the people's hearts to plummet. The storyteller sighed. "That day, the Main General set out alone with his horse and sword. He was to fight against He Xia, surrounded by Yun Chang's generals and soldiers, all of them cheering for He Xia. The Main General understood that if he killed He Xia, he wouldn't be able to survive. The two combat masters clashed, their swords rattling as they thought a hundred strikes against each other. In the end, He Xia's swordsmanship emerged superior, aiming at a single gap, and the sword stabbed the Main General's abdomen "

“Ah...”

“Oh god...” The crowd burst into shock, each seemingly feeling He Xia’s sword stab into themselves.

The storyteller didn’t care about the commotion amongst the crowd, simply remaining immersed in the scene that would forever be tragic. “The Main General was able to block this stab originally, but when He Xia lunged in, he didn’t resist him. He didn’t care whether he was near death or not, he went in to cut He Xia’s throat. He Xia was plenty powerful himself, so that was able to dodge, but our Main General’s final struggle is not easy to dodge. Although his sword didn’t cut off his head, it stabbed into his shoulder.”

The storyteller hesitated for a moment, as if recollecting the thrilling scene. He slowly yet securely continued, “The Main General’s abdomen was stabbed and he fell off his horse. He Xia sat on the horse, the wound on his shoulder bleeding profusely. Dear people of Bei Mo, you really ought to have seen He Xia’s expression at that moment, you really ought to. Seeing their main advisor hurt, Yun Chang’s soldiers paled in shock, hurrying forwards to bandage them for him. He Xia stopped them with a hand, lowered his head and asked our Main General, ‘Is this worth it?’ and did you know what Main General replied with?” He stopped.

The audience was silent and were so numbed they could no longer feel their own breathing. They could only feel that they were standing there, watching the authoritative He Xia looking down from the horse and the seriously wounded Main General Ze Yin on the ground yet still had his dauntless pride.

It was a while before anyone finally whispered a word. “Sir, how did the Main General reply?”

The storyteller’s head moved in the darkness as if faintly smiling. He sighed in both lament and admiration. “The Main General lifted his head, smiled at He Xia as he said, ‘It’s worth it. Because from now on, all of Bei Mo’s people will know that He Xia is not that scary. He Xia can bleed, He Xia can be injured too. And there will definitely be a day when He Xia is defeated too.’”

His articulation was very clear, each word both slow and heavy. It entered everyone’s ears and entered everyone’s brain until it had seeped into everyone’s veins.

“My story is very short, this is the end of it. Let me drink some water, I still have to hurry to the next village.” He fumbled for a water jug by his feet and lifted it to his lips, drank. He then said, “I heard this story from someone else as well and that someone else heard from someone else too. I don’t know how it originated but we all know that it is true. As long as all of you listen to this story and keep it close to your heart, the Main General’s bloodshed was not in vain. Don’t forget, we still have Main General Ruo Han. Although we don’t know where he is right now, sooner or later, he will be like Main General He Xia and oppose He Xia once more.

He struggled up from the ground, grabbing onto his walking stick.

“Sir...” someone called, “What happened to Main General Ze Yin in the end? Did He Xia kill him?”

The storyteller shook his head. “Who knows? This story is passed on from person to person. I can only pass on what I have heard to you.” He continued onwards.

From now on, all of Bei Mo’s people knew that He Xia wasn’t scary.

He Xia could bleed.

He Xia could be injured too.

And there would definitely be a day when He Xia was defeated too

“Will Main General Ruo Han come back to lead soldiers?”

“Can we defeat He Xia? He’s a widely acclaimed general after all.”

“Even if we lose, so what?”

Tiny flickers of light seemed to be hidden in the audience’s crowd. They parted in small groups, until two slender and delicate figures remained behind, quietly standing in their place.

“Yangfeng...”

“He’s still alive.” Yangfeng stood silently for a very long time, stressing each syllable. “He must be alive, alive so he can wait for He Xia to bleed again, be injured. Alive so that he can see the day when He Xia is defeated.” In just a single phrase, her tears began to fall silently and quietly fall.

Pingting reached out a hand to hold onto Yangfeng’s cold and trembling hand.

She didn’t speak.

She was unable to comfort her. She was incompetent at comforting, mainly because Yangfeng was stronger than her. She knew Ze Yin better and understood how to love better.

Two famous generals existed under the heavens. One of them belonged to Yun Chang, the other to Dong Lin.

But Bei Mo didn’t quite have nothing.

Bei Mo had heroes, good men, hot-blooded youths, and unyielding persistence.

Not just Ze Yin, they had many, many, normal Bei Mo people.

The next day, the news was spread about fifteen miles ahead of the village. The corpse of the storyteller was found, cut into random pieces by sword. The white-haired head had been hung on a trunk, warning all the Bei Mo people who passed on the rumours.

A-Han and a few of the young men in the villagers took advantage of the cover from the night’s darkness to steal back his head. They quietly buried it on the hillside outside of the village.

They did not give him a grave, just a cup of yellow mud. Surprisingly, quite a lot of people went to pay their respects to this storyteller whose name was never known.

Among them included Pingting and Yangfeng who took their underaged children too.

It was an autumn day for harvest. The fruit was ripe, the horses were strong, and the sheep were fat.

In insecurity, the common person would unfortunately experience murder, tyranny and opportunity, but at the same time, they also had the opportunity to experience passion and heroic spirits.

After returning from the service, Pingting strode into the room. Without hesitation, she grabbed the sword “Divine Soul” off the wall.

“I don’t want you to go out of the mountains for me.” Yangfeng reached out to stop her, her eyes so red they seemed ready to cry tears of blood. Her expression however were resolute, “Pingting, don’t do anything for others, forcing yourself to do things you don’t want to do.”

“It’s not for you. It’s for me.” Pingting held the sword in her arms as she slowly turned around, her gaze flickering across her surroundings. She stressed each syllable, “I am going to give up on the stupid resentment and go look for my beloved man, my child’s father. I want him to love me, protect me, let my child and me to never be bullied or to be forced, so that we will never have to witness such tragedy again.”

Her elegant lips lifted ever so slightly, revealing a beautifully confident smile.

“Yangfeng, I’m just like Ze Yin. This is something I whole-heartedly want to do; this is what my heart wants me to do.” She looked for A-Han, “Mister, you still have a horse hidden right? Could you please lend it to me?”

“Madam Pingting, what do you want the horse for?”

Pingting hugged the sword tighter to herself as she laughed softly. “I want to look for a person, a man who can defeat He Xia. This journey will be very long, that’s why I need your horse. Also, please help Yangfeng to look after my Changxiao.”

Yangfeng saw her good friend’s weak figure and couldn’t bear the heavy pain in her heart. She secretly wiped away her tears, forcefully trying to act calm as she said, “Will you be fine by yourself, amongst all these frenzied soldiers? Where will you go to find the Duke of Zhen Bei who has been missing for so long already?”

“Don’t worry.” Pingting rolled her crystal-like eyes, using her best voice to strongly reply, “I will definitely find him if he is still alive.”

The peasants of Yun Chang’s capital welcomed the glorious return of their Prince Consort with a grand ceremony.

He Xia rode on the leading horse while receiving the cheers of the crowd. Fei Zhaoxing gathered his reins and rode towards him. He didn’t dare ride beside He Xia, so he remained half a horse behind as he whispered, “Prince Consort, once you enter the capital, will you first go to the Royal Residence?”

He Xia shook his head, coldly replying, “What need is there to go to the Royal Residence when Dongzhuo is already waiting for us at the Prince Consort Residence?”

Once he entered the Prince Consort Residence, Dongzhuo was indeed waiting for them inside. He Xia’s power was at its height and Dongzhuo rose up correspondingly. He was practically the manager of all affairs in Yun Chang’s capital now.

He Xia, Fei Zhaoxing and Dongzhuo entered the office. There were no other Yun Chang officials, so they could speak without fear.

He Xia asked, “What have the officials been saying?”

“Yun Chang’s officials are temporarily stable, but they are still very grateful towards the Royal House of Yun Chang.” Because Dongzhuo stayed behind in the capital to monitor the situation, he knew the officials’ actions like the back of his hand.

Fei Zhaoxing said, “It’s against Yun Chang’s law for the Marquess of Jing-An to become king. No matter how many achievements the Marquess of Jing-An gains, he will never have the blood of Yun Chang’s Royal House.”

"I've ventured on this topic with some of the most respected officials. With their attitude, they're not too much in favour of establishing a new country or electing a new king," said Dongzhuo.

He Xia's expression was unhappy. He sneered. "They're quite cunning. Several hundred thousands of soldiers are in my hands. If they dare interfere with me, they'll repeat Gui Changqing's mistakes."

"The army's generals are also deeply in favour with Yun Chang's Royal House. I'm afraid Marquess won't get much support on that." Fei Zhaoxing then comforted, "This isn't actually that hard, they're just an interfering bunch of loyal minions. As long as the Royal House disappears, they'll be without support and will immediately allege Marquess. By then, no one would object to a new king succeeding the throne. Country names and titles can be revamped after that."

Dongzhuo listened to Fei Zhaoxing's suggestion and was rather surprised that he meant to get rid of the Princess. He didn't feel much for the Royal House of Yun Chang, but Yaotian treated He Xia like no other. Killing her wasn't quite fair and his expression slightly changed. He lowered his voice, "The Princess has already been told to stay in the Royal Residence and won't pose any threat to us. Why do we have to be so ruthless and kill her? Not to mention, she has Master's flesh and blood in her belly."

Fei Zhaoxing had the skills to see through the civil strife brimming back in Gui Le. He knew inside details and always talked on the best interests of men. He explained, "As long as there are women, why can't you have children? It seems that the Marquess of Jing-An is very glorious indeed, but his footing isn't stable. He has to succeed the throne and set titles before..."

"Zhaoxing," He Xia held up a hand as he stood by the window. The start of day had begun. He lowered his voice, "Let's not argue first. You've just returned, so go rest first."

Fei Zhaoxing was slightly surprised. He glanced at the uncomfortable Dongzhuo and graciously replied, "Fei Zhaoxing shall retire first then."

He Xia sighed after waiting for Fei Zhaoxing to walk out of the room. He called, "Dongzhuo, you've been with me since childhood, so feel free to speak."

Although Dongzhuo remained in the capital during He Xia's army's expedition to all four corners. He heard rumours of the Yun Chang army's various action and collected a whole stomach load full of words. He wanted to tell them to He Xia when he returned. He wanted to spit it all out, but after He Xia's question, Dongzhuo's heart stumbled.

He had grown up in the Jing-An Ducal Residence since young and watched his Master become a criminal pursued by everyone, a genius fallen out of the heaven's favour. He watched his Master meticulously orchestrate on becoming the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, yet was oppressed by Yun Chang's government till the point he couldn't lift his head. He watched him rage and turn the tables in a single assembly, every injustice paid back thrice.

Ups and downs, stumbling. The general who the world feared stood before his eyes. He experienced a very bumpy road and Dongzhuo understood that the most.

Perhaps it was because he had every possible hardship, been hurt too much that He Xia's tactics today were increasingly violent and vicious, causing even Dongzhuo to be deeply chilled from within.

Dongzhuo raised his head to look at He Xia.

His Master's figure was handsome, but it felt further and further away, hazy. It was as if dense white mist floated between the two people, pulling apart their distance before their eyes.

"Master," Dongzhuo's voice was slightly pleading, "Please forgive and forget. The Gui family got what they deserved but the Princess is different. Does Master really not have any feeling towards the Princess in his heart?"

He Xia stiffened. He was silent after hearing Dongzhuo's words. The cruelty in his handsome face disappeared bit by bit, causing his expression to look a little bit softer.

At that moment, he seemed to be the passionately romantic He Xia in the Jing-An Ducal Residence again.

"In a world of politics and power, where does feeling dwell in?" He turned to look at Dongzhuo who he trusted the most. He Xia, a famous general who had never lost a battle and always pleased of himself, had a bitter smile with a hint of helplessness. "Dongzhuo, you've been with me for more than ten years now. Have I always been such a heartless person?"

There was none above him but one. Just a single moving illusion.

The Jing-An Ducal Residence had held military power, a prominent family, but just one Order from the King of Gui Le was enough to destroy all of it and bring his family to ruin and death.

What point was a Prince Consort? Yaotian was a weak woman who didn't understand military affairs. He actually dared ignore his painstaking efforts by casually dissolving the imminent war between Dong Lin and Yun Chang.

And he had already lost Pingting's smile and her qin sound. When returning home, he could only see an empty, lonely residence.

He'd had enough punishments...

He Xia closed his two eyes, covering up all of the fatigue and helplessness he felt.

## Chapter 60

The sound of hooves shattered the skies in the four countries. The victors bathed in their glory while the defeated fended against even more wounds, the dead not having a complete corpse.

Under all the gold, silver, sweet alcohol, passionate dances and all sorts of pleasuring indulgences, the turmoil below had peasants live in fear and hiding.

There wasn't any damage caused by war for now, because it was an environment too dangerous that even the Yun Chang army considered to be a uselessly dense forest.

Near the Bei Mo desert, there was a forest so densely packed by trees that even sunlight could not filter through and it stretched hundreds of miles. Throughout the year, countless beasts and poisonous bugs lurked in its shadows that belonged to this place.

Even the lumberjacks and hunters who were brought up only dared to use the edge of the woods to make a living. Very few dared to peek into this large, mysterious forest.

Who would remember that there was a mountain in this dense forest?

Mount Dianqing.

The peaks were handsomely steep. Once there a woman who commanded thousands of soldiers sat by the water source, lightly cupping a nuddle of water

The landscape was elegant like her eyes. The mountain's water was sweet like her singing voice.

She was famous for moving the world with her qin skills, those slender fingers. Yet due to the impending danger at Kanbu City, she was forced to hold onto Bei Mo's military power.

At that time, a soul led the enemy army stationed at the peak, ready to confront her, the world-famous general—the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

The undercurrents, murder, lies, and conspiracy were staged here until, finally, her wish was granted.

And his.

The past incidents no longer existed.

And who knew before their plunge down the cliff, they had once again decided to swear to the moon and ride with sweet joy? When the Cloud Valley Route suddenly snapped, they had done everything to tightly hug onto each other as they fell through the air.

None.

Not one understood.

*Why did Duke come?*

*For you.*

But what importance was the fact that no one understood? The wind knew, the clouds knew. The drooping branches of the trees and falling ripe red fruit had all listen and seen.

The moon in the sky witnessed them.

“Let's swear to the moon to never go against each other.”

But if he really did love her so much, how could he turn against her?

How could he?

The wild berries in the valley had a fiery taste; Pingting leaned against the tree, enduring it all.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei who had thundered the world, followed by a complete disappearance, was here.

He had forgotten everything.

He had forgotten Dong Lin, Bei Mo, Gui Le, Yun Chang, military power and the throne. He had forgotten the cheers of admiration from the peasants and the glorious triumph he felt while on a horse.

He only remembered what he lost.

*You killed Pingting. You hated her and sent her off to He Xia, so that she died a lonely death in the snow.*

Dwindling blossoms and off falls foliage, the drizzles of hurt autumn.



His lofty sentiments and aspirations were now a silent flowing river.

He didn't care about the world's people laughing at the state he had fallen to nor did he care about the glory of being a world-acclaimed general. Because, he lost Pingting.

Pingting, the Jing-An Ducal Residences' Bai Pingting. Her name had spread throughout the world and her story, never left people's mouths.

But only he knew what kind of woman she really was, and how she was so beautiful that it would break his soul.

*If there are soldiers, there will be fame;*

*If there is fame, there will be fraud;*

He listened to the most beautiful qin, to the most beautiful song.

*Soldiers know fraud,*

*Soldiers know fraud...*

The qin sound was pleasant to the ear like a waterfall of soft black hair that spilled to the ground, like a little stream on a mountain, like the soaring birds in the clouds.

Age slowly passed through his body but thoughts never stopped for a single moment. The mountain wind he breathed reminded him of kissing Pingting's fine hair. His deeply hidden location within the ravines liked the fact of being buried in his memories.

He was still as distraught as the first day he had learned of losing Pingting.

Chu Beijie sat underneath a tree. He didn't know how many days had passed like this, nor did he know how long he was going to continue like this. The wild plants in the valley flowered all throughout the year, so he didn't have to worry about being hungry. He casually picked one and put it in his mouth. Quite a large number of them were sweet but occasionally there'd be one or two unbearably bitter ones. They seemed to coincide with the pain in his heart, so he just swallowed them without further complaint.

The mountain wind passed through, bringing a bit of coldness into the forest.

The sun disappeared in the west, leaving behind a few reddish clouds. They hid on the other side of the mountain as if a bit hesitant.

Although Chu Beijie was devastated, he still had the bones he used to set fire during childhood, so he wasn't afraid of the cold nor the beasts that came to hunt during the dark of night. He sat against a tree until the bright moon rose, the time when he thought of Pingting the most. His burning heart tore up in immense pain once again.

He stood up from underneath the tree, slowly making his way towards the humble cabin he had put together.

Every day was a simple loop. Even Chu Beijie himself had never thought that he'd destroy his ambitions for a woman and willing be trapped in a mountain forest.

Chu Beijie raised his head. The roughly-made cabin was right before his eyes, standing in the valley, lonely and lifeless like its owner.

Thinking now, he only just realised how precious the days he had spent with Pingting. The times when they gazed at the stars, listened to qin, and admired the snow.

*Squeak...* The wooden door had no lock. It swung open with a push. The simple furnishings were like usual and entered his eyes one by one.

Then an unexpected colour suddenly leapt into the corner of Chu Beijie's eyes.

Chu Beijie stood by the door, slowly raising his eyes. That elegant colour in his eyes slowly began to collect into a shape in the depths of his eyes, forming a tiny spark. It seemed to wrestle out some of the sharpness in the Duke of Zhen-Bei's gaze, as if erasing the thick dust with a prick.

Delicate, exquisite, demure and silently standing in the room was something like an endless sparkling light. It shone to every direction, rendering those simple table, chair, window into something with colour.

There was only one person, with just a single back view, that could so wonderfully merge heaven and earth.

Chu Beijie stood dazed by the door, light bursting into his eyes. He saw a miracle.

A miracle that he hadn't dare expected to see in his life.

Chu Beijie swore that this was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen in his life.

Pingting, it had to be Pingting...

Apart from Pingting, who else would know of the sadness and joy in the valley underneath the Cloud Valley Route? Who else knew they spent the night together, being so happy in the sweetness that it felt like they would disperse to air?

And who else would understand all that past in this vast, dense forest?

Pingting, only his Pingting.

The Pingting who fell together with him down Cloud Valley Route, the Pingting who cried, laughed, and hugged him in this valley full of wild berries.

The heavens took pity for her soul remained.

*Pingting, Pingting, you're finally willing to see me.*

Chu Beijie hurriedly took a step forward and abruptly stopped his feet again, holding his breath.

*Don't, don't scare her.*

If he did, she might instantly become smoke, magically turn into fog, and disappear with the wind.

The once-famous Duke of Zhen-Bei stayed rooted to the spot, feeling helpless. He greedily studied his beloved woman with sparkling eyes but feared a single sound would startle the beautiful sight.

*Pingting, you're finally, finally willing to see me.*

*I would like to apologise to you, for every hint of damage I have given you.*

*I am willing to give you my everything, my life, death, and honor, to compensate you.*

*What need is life and death? Just don't let me lose you again.*

*That is the world's most cruel punishment.*

Chu Beijie didn't dare close his eyes to blink. As he stared at that back view, memories of the past surged like an avalanche.

Pain, regret, surprise, gratitude and overbearing love all tumbled into his heart. His chest felt like it was swelling until it instantly broke apart, causing the most courageous general of the battlefield to be unable to restrain himself any longer. He lowered his voice, as if reading out a name that had constantly come back to torture him. "Pingting?"

*Is that you?*

*Is that really you?*

*The moon is in the sky again. Did you come to see me, because you still remember our oath even though your soul has flown to a place thousands of miles from here?*

The back view in the room twitched slightly. Her movements were so graceful like the breeze sweeping the delicate buds of early spring. It was so calm, so gentle. Everything seemed so very much, like an unrealistic dream.

That dreamy face turned towards his eyes, inch by inch. "Duke, you're back?"

*It's Pingting, it's really Pingting!*

Chu Beijie's black eyes were filled with tears and saw a happy, faintly smiling face.

Her smile revealed that her pale cheeks were a bit haggard, but her gracefulness remained.

She had come.

After numerous painful, heartbreaking thoughts, she came in the end.

The energy he had lost by aging and despair now seemed to pulse in from the soil below into his feet. It grabbed at him, pulling him down till he was almost kneeling right there to thank this dense forest of a hundred miles.

It gave him a miracle, a miracle that belonged to his lifetime.

He sheepishly stood as he stared his most beloved woman, who gracefully ambled towards him.

"Duke, Pingting has come to confess her sins."

Her voice was beautifully mellow, each word like a pearl scattering into a jade bowl. He thought he went deaf before this.

It had been a long and arduous journey, but what did it matter since all the time had evaporated to smoke?

The Pingting before him was really beautiful, a dream that people would rather not wake from. The Duke of Zhen-Bei who had chilled so many the hearts of so many enemies, didn't even have the courage to raise his hand to lightly touch the figure. He feared that just a single touch of his fingertip would have everything crumble.

Chu Beijie's dark eyes stared at her, moved beyond words.

*Why confess?*

*Isn't the one who needs to beg for forgiveness be me?*

"Pingting made a mistake that all women make." Pingting deeply looked at him, softening her voice, "Pingting made the man who deeply loved her suffer." The corners of her lips rose, revealing a wry smile. "But, Pingting had her heart broken by Duke too."

The smile went straight to his heart and the beautiful woman came closer in his eyes.

Pingting pursed her lips as she smiled.

Her smile was just that beautiful. Chu Beijie couldn't stand it any longer, he tentatively reached out to grasp onto Pingting's wrist.

The palm he touched was soft, gentle and warm.

Warm?

Chu Beijie looked in disbelief at the Pingting in front of him. She really didn't look like a ghost. He loosened his grip before carefully clenching her delicate hand once more.

It was warm.

Her creamy skin was very warm, so warm that even the tears Chu Beijie had been holding back for so long, finally began to trickle down.

Alive, she was still alive?

She wasn't a ghost but a living Pingting!

A violent surprised joy shook him even fiercer than a snowstorm, causing Chu Beijie a severe jolt.

"Pingting...Pingting, you're still alive?" He opened his arms, desperately clutching onto her in them.

This real sensation was enough to make anyone weep tears.

Pingting obediently allowed herself to be buried in his arms. She whispered, "Pingting didn't lose her life to the wolf pack. I'm sorry to make Duke worry, is Duke angry?"

"No, no." Chu Beijie vigorously shook his head.

Joy filled every pore of his body.

*Why angry? Pingting's alive, she's still alive, she's alive!*

*This is the happiest thing in the world, so what is there to be angry for?*

He felt like happiness merge into his surroundings.

*Thank the heavens and the earth, thank the mountains and forests, thank all the world that is tied to the gods for Pingting is still alive!*

Chu Beijie reverently murmured, acknowledging and thanking the miracle God had given him.

The familiar scent that only belonged to Pingting wafted into his nose. He clutched onto the slender body in his arms.

It felt like he had lost the ability to speak nor did he know the language to express his inner joy and excitement.

He used every bit of power in his body to feel the Pingting in his arms. He felt every bit of warmth in her petite body, every heartbeat and every tiny movement.

He remained fearful and cautious as he tried to control his trembling arms to embrace his beloved woman.

In this lifetime he would never, never, let go again.

The sun rose from the east in Yun Chang's capital.

After a long night, the Prince Consort finally came to the Royal Residence.

The Royal Residence had gained a number of new treasures, each tribute increasingly beautiful. The rich ornamentation remained befitting to the originals, except all of the guards protecting the Royal Residence had been changed. Each of the new guards had been handpicked from hundreds of others. Every one of them only complied with the Prince Consort, carefully guarding the sole Master of Yun Chang—Princess Yaotian.

“Prince Consort.”

“We bow to the Prince Consort.”

He Xia went passed the various guards, finally reaching the most exquisite and quietest courtyard of the Royal Residence. He raised his head, raising his handsome features.

He saw Yaotian.

In a tower, his pregnant wife was sitting by the window. She was no longer dressed in the complex noble princess dress, substituting it for a simple elegant design and solid coloured. Her silky black hair hung down like a waterfall, relaxing on her shoulder.

Looking at her, He Xia's heart was thrown into a complicated and rather complex feeling.

She was the source of He Xia's military power. When he was suffering, she gave him new hope.

Yet, she was also the restriction of He Xia's military power.

As long as the Yun Chang Royal House had one breath left, He Xia would never be able to convince the Yun Chang army enough to propose the establishment of a new country.

He would never be able to ascend to the throne.

No matter how much territory he conquered, he would only ever be the Prince Consort or the father of the future king.

He would forever have to kneel to his wife, and in the future, he would have to bow towards his own son.

He Xia's heart sank as he slowly climbed the stairs.

"Princess."

Hearing his voice, Yaotian slowly turned around from her seat at the window. Half of her beautiful face was revealed. She whispered, "Prince Consort is finally willing to see me."

He Xia solemnly bowed towards her, took a step forward, and sat opposite of Yaotian. "Has Princess been doing well?"

"I'm fine." Yaotian replied slowly. Her gaze rested on He Xia's soldiers. Her expression changed a bit before instantly turning back to her look of indifference. She asked, "Has Prince Consort been doing well?"

He Xia lowered his head, looking at his own shoulder. He lightly replied, "Ze Yin sent me a letter of challenge. As expected of the highest commander of Bei Mo's army, he actually managed to injure me. Is Princess worrying about me?"

Yaotian replied, "Prince Consort is already the world's most powerful man. Why would I get worried?"

He Xia raised his eyes to briefly meet with her bright eyes. She knew they could not conceal her disappointment and sadness, as well as the hatred he expected.

"Does Princess hate me?" He Xia sighed.

"If I said yes, will Prince Consort kill me? Like killing the Senior Official and everyone else?"

He Xia's handsome face revealed a trace of pity. He straightened and got up, helping Yaotian up as well. "Princess, please stand."

He led Yaotian onto the tower's balcony, overlooking the world.

"Princess, please look. Our horses have travelled throughout the world. There will never be any barriers to stop them. The four countries are now in my pocket, and the promise He Xia made to Princess is about to come true immediately. As my wife and the Princess, do you not feel happy for me?"

Yaotian lowered her eyes. It was a long time before her red lips moved. "Prince Consort, it's true I am supposed to be happy that Prince Consort's men have reached the whole world or am I supposed to be worried about the future of my Yun Chang's Royal House?"

"Princess..."

Yaotian suddenly raised her head, grasping onto He Xia's hand. She softly said, "If Prince Consort really loves Yaotian, please give promise me. Prince Consort, you must give up on establishing a new country. Promise Yaotian that my Yun Chang's Royal House will never disappear in this chain of victorious battles."

She stared into He Xia's eyes with her own, clear and bright. Although Yaotian was forbidden from going outside, she was still the highest ranked member of the Royal House in Yun Chang. She held onto a kingship recognised by all. He Xia couldn't help avoid her eyes at that moment, breaking away from her hand. He turned until his back was facing her and sighed, "Why is Princess' thoughts so narrow? We are husband and wife, even if I become king, Princess will definitely be queen. Both our positions are equally important. Not to mention, Princess is pregnant with my flesh and blood..."

“Prince Consort can’t be king.” Yaotian stiffened behind him for a moment. Her tone went harder and colder as she emphasised her words, “The child in my belly should be the future king.”

He Xia heard her harsher tone. He turned and softened his voice, “Princess...”

“Prince Consort doesn’t need to say any more. Please leave.” Yaotian interrupted him, stubborn.

He Xia briefly froze.

Yaotian’s expression was calm and she stood there, noble and dignified with a pride that oozed from her bones. At that moment, He Xia strangely and deeply felt that his beautiful and gentle wife who he could always impress with his words was indeed the representative on an ancient royal family.

## Chapter 61

In the dense forest, a small cabin was filled with joyous vitality.

Although it was very quiet, the joyous air presence was undeniable.

On the wooden bed lied two people, caught by the joy. Perhaps they won’t be able to sleep at all that night.

“The stars tonight are particularly bright,” Chu Beijie said as he held onto the resurrected Pingting.

Pingting chuckled softly.

“What’s funny?”

“Duke finally knows how to speak.” She gently smiled and saw Chu Beijie’s eyes rest on her face, his eyes so black that the depths couldn’t be seen. She couldn’t help smile shyly as she murmured, “What is Duke looking at?”

Chu Beijie looked at her for a long time before sighing, “Pingting, you’re so beautiful.”

Pingting was touched to her heart. She lowered her voice, “Duke is a lot thinner; it’s all Pingting’s fault.”

“It has nothing to do with Pingting. It was something I whole-heartedly wanted to do. I like Pingting; that’s why I’m willing to do anything for Pingting, willing to put every minute and second on Pingting.”

Pingting was silent before slowly saying, “Men are ambitious, so shouldn’t you be focusing on the world?”

“To wholeheartedly do something, remain undaunted by the setbacks, is great ambition itself.” Chu Beijie gently stroked her silky hair as he added, “My ambition is only one, to let you become the happiest woman in the world.”

Pingting raised her head, a pool of water swelling up in her eyes. She whispered, “Does Duke really think that?”

Chu Beijie held up two fingers towards the sky. His face was solemn, “I, Chu Beijie, swear to the skies that the words I just said, every single word, will never be changed, no matter what in this lifetime.”

Pingting was utterly touched as she watched him. The tears in her eyes rippled slightly before sliding down.

“Then Duke are you willing to do one thing for Pingting?”

Chu Beijie softly replied, “Not just one, even thousands are fine. As long as Pingting desires it, no one will stop Chu Beijie from granting it.”

Pingting raised her eyes, quietly studying the man she loved so dearly. His handsome eyebrows were still very black. His straight nose and thin lips were all very much like in her dreams.

Every tiny gesture of his hand was never once lost from her heart.

This was the man she deeply loved.

Perhaps the deep love she had in this single lifetime would be more than a person would have in three.

The love was deep but so was the pain. They thought they had suffered enough, but like moths to a flame, they had turned back.

She reached out, taking an object out from the bag beside the bed.

“Duke once left this sword in the secluded residence in order to protect Pingting’s safety.” Pingting held the sword with two hands as she slowly asked, “Is Duke willing to use the very same sword to remove the turmoil and unify the four countries, so Pingting can be given a peaceful world to live in?”

Chu Beijie was isolated for so long he had not heard any news about the war. He was stunned. Knowing Pingting’s heart and mind, he knew that she would never make such a request unless it was the very last resort.

“Does Duke not want to?” Pingting’s eyebrows drooped as she softly asked.

“Chu Beijie had spent his whole lifetime in the military. The one thing he was never afraid of was going out to the battlefield to kill enemies. Not to mention, the one who made the request was Pingting, so there was no way he wouldn’t want to. “

He hesitated, breaking into a smile, “Giving wives a cosy and peaceful home is the one thing that all men must do.”

He immediately took the sword, its familiar sensation entering his palm. That day he discarded Divine Spirit at the mourning hall. Today, it returned to its former owner’s hand once more.

As well as its heaviness and coldness, he still remembered every pattern on Divine Spirit. That sword once commanded an army of several thousands of troops and killed any enemy without restriction.

Once it was out of its scabbard, it shook the world.

This was the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s sword.

In Chu Beijie’s eyes, the light of hope for the world began to sparkle.

His sword was in his hand, and the woman he loved returned.

His ambition started.

The dense forest of a hundred miles had given him a miracle, and he had to return the world with another miracle.

He would use this sword in his hand to conquer the world, for the most attractive woman who ever lived.



Although the Royal Residence of Dong Lin was burned, as long as Dong Lin's Royal House remained alive, the country would never truly fall.

He Xia's battle had begun. His horse didn't stop galloping, going everywhere to direct the battle. He always dealt enemies in an organised manner, without hesitation, but when he thought of how to dispose Yaotian, he was very hesitant.

A few days after his return to Yun Chang's capital, Fei Zhaoxing raised the matter several times, but He Xia just pushed it back, feeling annoyed. "There's no hurry right now. Wait until we're done with the Royal Houses of Dong Lin and Gui Le."

Fei Zhaoxing repeatedly advised, "Prince Consort, this is currently small and pleasant to deal with, but if it isn't treated early, I'm afraid that there will be greater suffering in the future."

There was no way He Xia didn't know that.

The army crusading around was all under his control, most of them from the Yun Chang army- apart from a few prisoners of war and a few new recruits. If the news of Yaotian being under house arrest were leaked or that Yaotian took the initiative in denying He Xia's power as lead commander, then it would shake the current situation of victory.

Did he really have to harm his wife and son?

He Xia was distressed over this. His mind wasn't in battle. He couldn't smell the familiar scent of blood or the flavour of smoke. Even when facing good alcohol, he seemed to be even more anxious and impatient. Seeing how his expression was so terrible, the other officials in court became alarmed as they weren't too sure whether they had offended the Prince Consort and feared that the fate of the Gui family would happen to them.

Fortunately a few days later, an army report was sent.

"We have found Royal House of Dong Lin's hiding place, our troops have already surrounded them."

"Good!" He Xia smiled, "The Royal House of Dong Lin has been slipping past us for many days. You mustn't let them escape again. Surround them tightly but don't attack for now. I will personally deal with them."

Sending back the messenger, He Xia immediately collected his soldiers and departed. He was attentive to all details and knew the officials of Yun Chang only feared death. They didn't actually fully surrender to him. He had to be wary, so he ordered Fei Zhaoxing to stay behind and watch over the capital with Dongzhuo.

He hadn't expected the troops to only travel two hundred miles in less than three days. Fei Zhaoxing rushed towards them by a fast horse, stopping He Xia and his men.

"Where is the Prince Consort?"

He Xia pulled back the reins, turning back to look. Fei Zhaoxing's face was full of dust and accompanied by only a few guards. He was immediately alarmed and raised his voice to ask, "Come here, Fei Zhaoxing!"

The crowd of people parted in the middle to lead Fei Zhaoxing to the right place. Once He Xia dismounted, he asked, "What happened at the capital?"

The matter was urgent. Fei Zhaoxing fished out a letter from his arms without even wiping the dust off his face. He looked at He Xia with a very solemn expression as he handed over the letter.

He Xia took the letter, opened it and scanned the first two lines. His expression had already become strange. As he read on, his eyebrows furrowed until they were almost knotted. There was a mask of frost as he lowered his voice, asking, "This is an Order. This...is the Princess' handwriting?"

His eyes sank so cold it was shocking.

"Yes. I have already had the handwriting checked by specialists. It isn't an imitation but undoubtedly from the Princess herself."

He Xia fumed, "Weren't the Princess's royal maids not allowed to leave the Princess at all? With all those guards around, how could a royal maid manage to get out? And with a letter too?"

"Please calm down, Prince Consort." Fei Zhaoxing calmly replied, "This matter has been ascertained already. One of the guards received a bribe and has already been caught. Perhaps because of concern and hidden feelings, he hasn't exposed any hidden secrets yet. The interrogation is still continuing."

"Interrogate him carefully." The depths of He Xia's eyes was like a sheet of ice, but his facial colour seemed to have restored a little calmness. "Has the maid been interrogated yet? What did she say?"

Fei Zhaoxing replied, "The maid was timid and confessed everything without any real torture used. The Princess wrote this and gave it to her personal maid, Luyi. Luyi then gave it to her, instructing her to secretly give it to Official Zhang Yin and then Official Zhang Yin to some other officials to read."

"Some other officials?" He Xia sneered, "Which officials don't want their lives I wonder. Where's the list?"

Fei Zhaoxing bent down respectfully, "Official Zhang Yin must have the list in his hands. Before leaving the capital, I have already sent men to secretly arrest Zhang Yin. He is currently being tortured. At the same time, this matter is no trivial one. One that mustn't be known by others. That's why Dongzhuo was left behind to guard the capital while I came to chase Prince Consort."

He worked fast, treated everything appropriately and was quite a flexible solver. He Xia couldn't help but glance at him with appreciation.

Fei Zhaoxing's report had finished. He hesitated before continuing in a low voice, "Prince Consort, please immediately come back to the capital. Currently the Dong Lin Royal House isn't important but Yun Chang's capital. The Princess has already made her move. If they really do find out the truth, the situation will be too difficult to deal with. Those civil service officials are quite timid. They're nothing to fear about, but the Princess is still the sole Master of Yun Chang. No one else but Prince Consort dares to deal with the Princess."

"The Princess personally penned this Order, wanting all of the officials to secretly prepare to strip me of my right to lead the troops in one sweep..." He Xia looked down at the Order in his hand, his rage rising again. His fingers closed in, crushing the Order in his palm. He softly ground his white teeth and became silent for the longest time. Slowly, the colour returned to his face. "Does the Princess know about this?"

"In theory, she shouldn't. The maid was caught on the way to Official Zhang Yin. Since the Princess is in the Royal Residence, guarded by a huge number of guards, no one should be able to talk to the Princess or her royal maids."

He Xia nodded, "You and I will immediately return to the capital. This matter mustn't be delayed; we must immediately destroy the source of trouble."

Fei Zhaoxing heartily nodded, "Exactly."

Without further ado, He Xia made his choice. He immediately picked out half of the troops to return with him to the capital, leaving the other half to continue travelling with the one general chosen by him. He commanded, "When you get to Dong Lin, pass on my Order. Immediately attack and surround the Dong Lin Royal House. The Queen who holds all of Dong Lin's power must be caught alive as my trophy. The others don't need to live."

Once the Order was laid out, he and Fei Zhaoxing immediately galloped towards the government.

The group didn't stop galloping, heading for the capital day and night. Once they got through the city gates, Fei Zhaoxing lowered his voice to ask, "Prince Consort, will you first go to the Royal Residence?"

He Xia shook his head, "We'll go to the Prince Consort Residence first."

Once they arrived at the Prince Consort Residence, he asked about the situation. Zhang Yin hadn't been able to last the torture early on, giving up the confidential list of officials he was supposed to contact.

He Xia took over the list, skimmed through it and raised his voice to summon a general he could trust. He ordered, "Immediately send an Order from the army. Just say Gui Le assassins have sneaked into the capital. Issue a curfew so that no one is to freely walk around on the streets."

Once the Order for a curfew had been set, he then spoke to Dongzhuo. "Most of the civil officials on the list are in the capital. There is no need to worry for now. Use the curfew as an excuse to send troops to guard them in their own homes. Be careful to choose ones that won't spill the beans."

Dongzhuo acknowledged He Xia's instructions before hurriedly leaving to personally make the arrangements.

"There is one thing I want you to immediately do." He Xia turned his head to look at Fei Zhaoxing, "My favoured generals are trust me quite a bit. If Yun Chang is going to change, many people will chose to support me except for General Shang Lu, in charge of military vehicles. Shang Lu's family has been looked after by the Yun Chang Royal House for generations. His loyalty is blind and old-fashioned. If I really do ascend to the throne, he will be the first to oppose me in the army."

Having said that much, Fei Zhaoxing understood what he wanted. "Please give your instructions, Prince Consort."

"Shang Lu is currently stationed at Bei Mo. I'll write a military Order, to have him launch an attack against Gui Le. Find a chance for a confrontation with Gui Le's General Le Zhen. You take the Order and personally go to Bei Mo to announce it. Lead your Weibei Regiment to destroy Le Zhen's army with Shang Lu. For this battle, Shang Lu will be vice while you will be the main general. Do you know what to do?"

Fei Zhaoxing's train of thought was always clear. He nodded, "The general will die in battle and become a legend of ten years. When the two armies clash, casualties are inevitable. As a general of Yun Chang, Shang Lu's death is normal. Rest assured, Prince Consort."

He Xia rapidly churned out two military Orders. One of them was to be handed to Shang Lu, the other to Fei Zhaoxing's position as main general during the battle for Gui Le. He put down the pen and faintly smiled, "Shang Lu must be dealt with, and Le Zhen can't be missed either. Our military power is enough with this confrontation, but I'm just afraid that you and Le Zhen's relationship as former master and servant will cause a brief moment of hesitation."

Fei Zhaoxing respectfully took the military Orders. He replied, "I put my life at risk for the Le family yet fell to the state where I had to cook dead dogs for food. What is the significance of a relationship as former master and servant? Le Zhen's skill is mediocre, only becoming a general with the accomplishments of his elders. I will definitely crush him, overwhelmingly." While carefully tucking the Orders in his sleeves, he lowered his voice again, "Prince Consort, the Royal Residence..."

He Xia cut off his words, "About the Royal Residence, I will deal with them. You go."

Once Fei Zhaoxing was sent off, the ornate office suddenly quietened.

He Xia stood by himself for a long time, taking the Princess' letter from his sleeves. A few days ago, he wrung the letter while feeling incredibly annoyed. It became unbearably wrinkled. He laid the letter out on the table, slowly flattening it as he re-read it again. His expression was like calm water, without ripples, but his eyes held a sharp light. Underneath those tiny sparks, no one knew exactly how many complex thoughts lay hidden.

Once Dongzhuo finished instructing, he hurried back. He only took one step into the office before seeing He Xia's back. Feeling a bit startled, his other foot remained posed outside the door, not yet inside the room.

He Xia's back seemed to be made up of concentrated worry. His large body seemed as heavy as mountains as if using all of the energy in one's body wouldn't be able to make him budge in the slightest.

"Is that Dongzhuo? Come in."

Dongzhuo was frozen at the door and only stepped inside after hearing He Xia's words. He slowly walked towards the table until he was standing beside He Xia. He lowered his head and was surprised to see the Order Princess Yaotian wrote. Naturally he knew what was written on it and his heart sighed. He lowered his voice to ask He Xia, "How does Master plan to deal with the Princess?"

"All of you are asking the same difficult problem." He Xia's smile was bitter. He pursed his lips, making him look even colder than usual. "If this letter was successfully sent out to the various officials while I was outside the capital, the moment their plans succeed and the Princess is rescued, the army of Yun Chang's morale would shake."

"Master..."

He Xia ignored Dongzhuo's words; he continued to whisper, "If the Princess were to re-appear before the people, she will have a better grasp in the situation. No matter how many achievements I have in war, how many victories won, how many unimaginable victories, the soldiers of the Yun Chang army would gradually leave me because my opponent is Yun Chang's one and only master. Soldiers and peasants don't know how to choose men of talent. They only know stupid loyalty and allegiance to the Royal House."

He Xia's every word seemed to be cut out from ice. Dongzhuo listened which made his whole body shiver. His lips twitched, wanting to open, but he felt as if his lips had been frozen to ice and was unable to say anything.

Indeed, if Yaotian successfully got back the throne, He Xia would suffer a crushing defeat. A shocking Order would be written, sentencing the Prince Consort to death due to his betrayal by attempting to establish a new country.

The air in the office began to clot. Even fresh air could not blow apart this chill brought by power struggles.

"Say, do you think the Princess really likes me?" He Xia suddenly turned to one side.

Dongzhuo took a while processing the question before he plucked up his courage. "Master, the Princess wrote such an Order only because she wanted the Yun Chang Royal House to survive. The situation forced her heart because in her heart...in her heart..."

He Xia looked at Dongzhuo. He suddenly smiled gently, "In her heart, she doesn't actually want to kill me, right?"

Dongzhuo looked at He Xia's smile, instantly feeling terrified. At first he wanted to nod, but he struggled for a long time before finally dragging out a sigh. He reluctantly said the truth, "Master is right. If Princess really does regain the

throne, even if the Princess doesn't want to, she will certainly be pressured by the other officials to sentence Master to death."

He Xia was indeed worried about this matter. The words of truth were like needles that pricked until He Xia's heart had sores. Dongzhuo said it, no longer caring about the possibly dire consequences. He did not know what He Xia's reaction would be so he lowered his eyes, not daring to look at him.

A long time passed when he heard a faint sigh overhead.

He Xia said, "I will prepare a gift and go to the Royal Residence to see the Princess."

In Bei Mo, about eighty miles to the right of Kanbu City, there was a settlement known as Jiangling Ancient City.

It was an abandoned ancient city; most of the walls had collapsed.

Yellow sand filled the horizon.

"Main General, have some water."

The subordinate's water was a muddy yellow. Jiangling Ancient City's environment was perilous. Water and other resources were seriously inadequate. But it was remote. The secret tunnels in the city reached everywhere so even if the attention of the Yun Chang army was caught, escaping was possible.

Ruo Han took the spoon and drank a small sip. He handed it to the soldiers by his side, "Drink some."

Bei Mo's official military force had been defeated by He Xia in the Battle of Zhouqing. Ruo Han managed to escape with his life and collected the remnants to resist He Xia two or three times, but as the opposition was a famous general, each attempt ended in failure.

The difference between their strengths were far too great, whether it was the number of troops, ability of generals or military power. All were far less than their opposition. Being able to protect his own life and the group of soldiers around him was not easy.

Even so, everyone there had not once thought about surrendering to He Xia.

The soldiers beside him looked up at the burning sky. They suddenly asked, "Main General, how many people do you think General Senrong will bring back?"

"Quite a few," Ruo Han replied, his heart swelling a little.

He thought of his former boss, the greatest general of Bei Mo, Ze Yin.

Ever since the story of Main General Ze Yin's open challenge to He Xia, the number of peasants that secretly requested to join the rebel army were growing.

No one knew in the end how the story started, but everyone knew that it was true.

He Xia could bleed and there would definitely be a day when He Xia would be defeated too. That was how Main General Ze Yin put it.

As long as dreams are not forgotten, fighting spirits still exist. Even in threat of death, the steady stream of future generations would never despair as they pursue

This time, Senrong would definitely bring back many more passionate young men.

“Main General, General Senrong has returned!” The sentinel vigorously waved.

Ruo Han abruptly got up, gazing into the distance. Far away, a few horses quickly riding appeared as expected. They headed towards the ancient city.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s the General Sen Rong all right.” The sentinel affirmed, but his tone sounded doubtful as he added, “Strange, why so few this time?”

Ruo Han was curious about the same thing.

Due to Main General Ze Yin’s action, the number of people who secretly enlisted were growing by the day, yet why did Sen Rong only bring back a selected few? Could it be that something went wrong?

Sen Rong’s horse came in at the speed of light, reaching the city in a few moments. He waved at the sentinel and the soldiers hurriedly let them inside the city.

Ruo Han strode towards the city entrance towards Sen Rong who just dismounted. He asked, “What’s going on? That’s all the new soldiers you got?”

Sen Rong reached for the water his subordinates brought forward. He didn’t care about its muddiness. He raised his head to drink the entire spoon. “There were a lot of new recruits, but I didn’t bring them.”

“Why not?”

“It’s easy to get three enemies, but hard to get a single general. Well...” Sen Rong’s heart definitely held happiness. The joy on his face couldn’t be controlled, and his face couldn’t help break into a grin.

“Don’t tell me you were able to find a general in a single trip?”

“Not just a general but more like a god! A general who can definitely defeat He Xia.”

Ruo Han heard his irresponsible remarks and his eyebrows wrinkled.

He Xia was a world-acclaimed general and deserved the title. He wondered who on earth was able to put himself on the same platform and say that he could definitely beat He Xia.

The soldiers of today had become much thinner, and the environment was harsh, shaking morale immensely. Sen Rong had always been careless. How on earth did he know? He could not take his words back once they were out of his mouth or else it would destroy the morale. He couldn’t help whisper, “Sen Rong, stop speaking nonsense. You’ve fought against He Xia. You know his strength. How is it even possible to have a general who can definitely beat He Xia? Unless...” Ruohan abruptly stopped, sighing instead.

He thought of Bai Pingting.

Back then, her eloquence during the Battle of Kanbu was still in the depths of his memory, as if carved in by a knife.

During the Battle of Zhouqing, He Xia’s strategy had been evil and unpredictable. Only Lady Pingting’s piece at the edge of Kanbu, forcing back Chu Beiji’s army of a hundred men in such tranquillity, could be compared to it.

Unfortunately, that beauty was gone.

Ruo Han pondered many times of the result if Pingting was the main advisor during the Battle of Zhouqing.

“Don’t sigh, Main General. Come, come, I have something for Main General to see.” Senrong laughed, taking a step forward. He untied his bag from his back. He pulled Ruo Han to one side as he opened it. He warned, “Main General, be careful. This treasure is quite dazzling, so do protect your eyes.”

Ruo Han saw his high spirits. He couldn’t help feel a bit strange as he patiently waited for him to open the bag. At first look, it was only a few muddy red, black or blue dyed cloths. There was even a few old stains of sweat and blood but when he looked even closer, it felt like his cheeks were drawn to it like a magical hold. He just stared at the opened bag, no longer able to move.

Senrong had long expected his reaction. He triumphantly asked, “What do you think?”

Ruo Han widened his eyes, staring at that bag. Others may not be able to tell but he could. Those old clothes were the cloaks the Bei Mo generals gave to Pingting in order to express their gratitude and loyalty after the Battle of Kanbu.

The bloodstained cloaks to these generals were full of meaning to themselves. They would only ever offer their cloaks when they felt inexpressible reverence. That bag contained Ze Yin’s, Senrong’s and Ruo Han’s own...

It was a while before Ruo Han finally reacted. His entire body trembled with excitement. “This...this...Sen Rong,” he stretched out his hands, tightly grabbing onto Senrong. He stuttered out, rather incoherently, “You mean, don’t tell me, Miss Bai, she...she didn’t die?”

Senrong was very pleased. At first he wanted to tease Ruo Han a bit, but seeing his excitement, he couldn’t help but push the thought down. He immediately nodded, loudly replying, “That’s right, Miss Bai didn’t die. She’s still alive.”

“Alive...” Ruo Han’s eyes lit up, “Then where is she?” Since being promoted to Main General, he had become even more attentive to details than before. He immediately turned, his gaze falling on the other people Sen Rong returned with.

One of the figures was particularly petite. She didn’t hide even when seeing Ruohan’s gaze. She raised her delicate hand to lift the big hat that veiled her face. “General Ruohan, long time no see.”

Her smile was exquisite, charming her surroundings.

At that moment, who else could possibly compare to that calm elegance apart from Bai Pingting?

Ruohan stayed rooted to the spot, staring at Pingting for a time long enough to burn a whole incense stick before slowly lifting a foot to walk towards Pingting. He slowly adjusted himself, slowly straightening his back, as if still not quiet believing Pingting was in front of his eyes. He finally let out a long breath and with great feeling, commented, “Ruohan finally understands what is called a gift from the heavens.”

Pingting chuckled lightly, “Main General, don’t be so quick to thank the heavens. This time Pingting has come to oppose He Xia’s Yun Chang army, but to do this she must collect her old debt.”

Ruohan saw Pingting’s long-lost smile, inspiring like the spring breeze. His confidence rose. He broke into a smile, “Ruohan is willing to offer his life to return My Lady’s help during the Battle of Kanbu. Ahh, even if you didn’t have these cloaks or helped during Kanbu, as long as My Lady is willing to oppose He Xia, there is nothing I can’t give My Lady.”

“That’s good...” The light in Pingting’s eyes shifted slightly as she breezily said, “Pingting boldly asks Main General to grant Pingting’s wish.”

“Please say it, My Lady.”

“Pingting brought a person that I hope all of Main General’s men will be loyal to him and listen to his orders. No matter who this person is, Main General must acknowledge him as the main advisor. Does Main General approve?”

Ruohan was stunned. “Who on earth has such capability that My Lady is willing to give him the rights to being the Main General?”

Pingting pursed her lips as if in thought. It wasn’t long before she smiled again. She softly sighed, “The battlefield situation is urgent and soldiers must know fraud. I wanted Main General to agree before saying it. Oh well, I’ll let Main General know who it is before considering whether to agree to Pingting’s request or not.” The light in her eyes flickered to the side as she gently called, “Duke.”

At this, Ruohan felt like his head had been fiercely struck by lightning, suddenly causing his world to spiral out of control.

No way, it couldn’t be...

His gaze gradually moved over.

The tall man beside Pingting removed his veiled hat, revealing an angular face. His eyes were tiger-like in spirit and when they met with Ruohan’s, he smiled. “That late night attack in the barracks was really just my desire to look for my wife. If Chu Beijie has offended Main General, please do forgive me.”

That tall figure, immovable as a mountain, was the Duke of Zhen-Bei who had been missing for so long.

Shock waves hit him, each one stronger than the last. Ruohan had many experiences, but at that moment, even he felt stunned. He stared at Chu Beijie for ages as if seeing his prodigal son.

Of the two renowned generals, apart from He Xia, the other was still alive.

He was still mighty and still had that look of confidence beyond measure.

“Is Main General willing to throw away the hatred between Dong Lin and Bei Mo to follow the Duke and oppose He Xia?” Pingting’s voice seemed to travel from far away, leaving bounce after bounce of gentle echoes.

Ruohan’s eyes gradually focused, stopping on Chu Beijie’s face. This person had once led troops to invade and almost destroy Bei Mo. He was the very same person who snuck into the barracks and toyed around with him until he had tricked them all into giving Main General Ze Yin’s whereabouts.

But this person was indeed the only general who could oppose He Xia in the world.

“Main General?” Senrong appeared behind him at some unknown time. He lightly pushed him.

Ruohan was startled, his senses returning. Pingting and the other generals all had their gazes pinned on him. When he raised his head, he saw the soldiers who followed him pop out from all over the city, straining their necks to see the famous Chu Beijie.

Everyone held their breath, waiting for his reply.



Ruohan raised his head, loudly asking, “Soldiers, you’ve seen it all. This man is Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei, the Chu Beijie who had almost destroyed our Bei Mo. Today he is before us, wanting us to follow him to oppose He Xia’s army. Tell me, should I refuse him?”

The surroundings were silent, not even a cough could be heard.

Ruohan asked again, but he was answered with silence once more.

“Fine...” Ruohan looked around, “I understand.” He then looked at Chu Beijie, lowering his voice, “The Royal House of Bei Mo has already been butchered by He Xia while Bei Mo’s territory is currently happily trampled on by the army of Yun Chang. It’s the most stupid thing to continue to hate Dong Lin at this moment. Whoever can defeat He Xia and save all the peasants of this place, I will acknowledge him as main advisor and will follow him onto the battlefield.”

Chu Beijie smiled faintly. His elbow was tugged before he heard a sonorous voice echo in his ear.

Under the hot sun, the famous Divine Soul sword’s cold light radiated in all four directions. The Duke of Zhen-Bei’s sword was unsheathed.

“I will defeat He Xia and save all peasants of this place. Soldiers, who is willing to follow me?”

Everyone listened to his deep voice, hidden with power.

The surroundings were even quieter than before.

“Who is willing to follow me, Chu Beijie?” Chu Beijie raised his voice, asking loudly.

Pingting slowly raised her head, her gaze lightly sweeping across the dusty faces.

“Me.” A soft sound was heard in the crowd.

“Me.” Said another sound.

“Me!” Someone yelled loudly.

“Me, I’m willing!”

“Me!”

“Me, me too!”

“Me!”

“Me!”

The echoes were like thunder as the crowd burst into wave after wave of roaring.

To follow the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Following the old enemy of Bei Mo, following this man who expelled despair from the earth, following this famous general who could defeat He Xia.

Their King was dead, the Royal Residence destroyed. The hearts were trampled on, and their parents were now being tortured by cavalry units.

But all they needed was fighting spirit, the courage to never succumb, to not be afraid of letting blood fall onto the yellow mud, rusty weapons and elderly horses.

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei!”

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei! Defeat He Xia!”

“Defeat He Xia! Defeat He Xia! Drive away the Yun Chang army...”

Jiangling Ancient City seemed to be teeming.

Every young face, covered in dust, dirt, blood, and wounds, was excited, full of smiles and hot tears.

Ruohan widened his eyes, trying to stop his touched tears from falling. He placed a hand at the sword on his waist. He took a step forward and declared, “I, Ruohan, swear to my sword that from now on, I am no longer Main General Ruohan of Bei Mo. I am the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s General Ruohan! Duke of Zhen-Bei, please remember your promise too.”

“I will defeat all people who cause loss of life, including He Xia.” Chu Beijie solemnly replied. His gaze shifted to Pingting, turning extremely gentle, “Because I promised my most beloved woman I would give her a peaceful world to live in.”

Pingting never thought Chu Beijie would display such affection before this massive crowd. Even though there was thunderous applause from all around, Chu Beijie’s gentle words were heard by Ruohan, Senrong and a few other acquaintances standing nearby. Pingting instantly reddened, not knowing how to reply. She lowered her eyes and barely managed to restore her usual calm appearance. She advised, “The morale is rising, so you should raise the important matters quickly. This is the first army Duke has formed since returning. Perhaps an official name should be given? For example...Zhen-Bei army.”

Her words held another meaning. This time each country’s troops had been slain, attacked by Yun Chang. These soldiers under Chu Beijie weren’t just Dong Lin any more. That meant he could no longer use that name or national pride would tatter the soldiers’ hearts.

Chu Beijie led troops for many years so he obviously knew what Pingting meant. He laughed as he nodded, “True, we do need to give it a name.”

He held up his sword to the sky, shouting, “All soldiers and generals, be quiet for a moment. I have something to say!”

With just one word, everyone silenced immediately. Everyone was full of anticipation as they looked at this invincible general.

“From today on, we will be the army that will oppose He Xia.” Chu Beijie slowly said, “This army will not be called the Zhen-Bei Army, the Beijie Army nor Dong Lin Army. We will be known as the Ting Army!”

Pingting softly gasped, looking at Chu Beijie in disbelief.

“Some of you may ask why it’s called Ting Army.” Chu Beijie’s strong shoulders suddenly reached out, pulling the petite Pingting into his arms. Chu Beijie raised his voice, “Because my most beloved woman is called Bai Pingting. I

promised her I will sweep away her panic and unify the four countries so that she has a comfortable world to live in. I challenge He Xia because I want to protect Pingting, protect the most precious thing in my, Chu Beijie's, life."

"Dear soldiers, you follow me not because of power, wealth, land, nor for dominance or ambition, nor is it a forced Order. It's isn't for me, Chu Beijie either."

"Then why on earth do you run the risk of following me?"

"Because, aren't you all the same as me, Chu Beijie?"

"In order to protect your loved ones, you go through bloodshed. You get hurt for your injured ones; you give up your life to get your wish."

"Tell me, you are the same as me!"

"Tell me, soldiers of the Ting Army, you will never forget why you are called the Ting Army!"

"Tell me, soldiers of the Ting Army, that you will never forget the people you love, never forget the things you cherish the most! Never forget why you are fighting!"

"Tell me in a loud voice, what is this army called?" Chu Beijie's voice rang out in the ancient city, into the clouds in the sky.

After a moment of silence, roars broke out.

"Ting Army!"

"Ting Army! Ting Army!"

"Ting Army!"

The entire Jiangling Ancient City was roaring, shaking.

Pingting remained in Chu Beijie's warm embrace, her hot tears silently dripping onto Chu Beijie's chest.

Senrong walked over. "The Duke of Zhen-Bei is the world's most powerful lover," he admired.

"I don't know about being the most powerful lover," Ruohan sighed, "but I'm certain he is the one general who understands how to boost an army's morale the best."

## Chapter 62

In Yun Chang, the pavilions were still like always.

The sun had already set.

Yaotian sat on the royal chair, quietly looking out over the Royal Residence. She stroke the curtain that trembled companionless in the wind. Only half of the rouge she'd put on remained as she stood in the front of the mirror, lonely

He Xia passed through the many guards on the main path of the Royal Residence and into the inner corridor. The paths became more and more narrow as he went, finally stopping at the quietest corner. A large, heavy lock tightly shut the wooden door to the small building in front of him.

Princess Yaotian and her personal maid, Luyi, were imprisoned there.

“Prince Consort.” Only the guards who He Xia trusted the most were assigned to guard the wooden door. The captain of the guards approached, greeting He Xia. He carefully asked, “Would Prince Consort like us to open the door to go in?”

He Xia’s raven black eyes slowly eyed the locked door.

Yaotian was inside.

She was his wife, the mother of his unborn child, the gentle, kind, smiling and persuasive princess. The sole Master of Yun Chang who personally wrote an Order, commanding him to be put to death, accusing him of betrayal.

He stared at the lock on the door, as if it didn’t just lock up the door but his heart. He stood there, silent for a long time, before shaking his head. “I’m not going in. Don’t tell anyone I came. Hand this inside and tell the Princess that I saw her Order. Zhang Yin had been secretly taking care of. This is my return gift. That Miss Fengyin, the one Princess presented me, helped me make it.”

The guards answered, carefully taking the pretty box from He Xia’s hands. The guard walked to the front of the door, took out a key, opened the door and entered.

The instant the door was opened, He Xia raised his head to look inside. In that fleeting moment, he could see nothing.

Not long later, the door opened from inside. The captain of the guards got out, carefully locking the door again. He approached He Xia to report, “The gift has been delivered. Every word Prince Consort said was delivered, not one word more...”

“Ah!” A sudden panicked scream was heard inside the room.

The frightened scream was completely off tune. Those familiar with Yaotian’s voice knew it was the Princess’ scream.

Those who were picked to guard the Princess were no ordinary people, but listening to her scream, almost all of the guards – including the captain himself- couldn’t help but shudder.

After the scream, there seemed to be a thud as something heavy fell onto the purple and golden tiles.

Everyone expected Yaotian had opened the box and was shocked by the contents inside. But what on earth had the Prince Consort given cause such desperate fear?

While the guards’ expressions were frightened, He Xia’s calm expression was even more terrifying.

Only he knew what that box held.

The box contained a treasure. At least, once upon a time, the Princess and Gui Changqing had both treasured.

They thought she could play qin songs as beautiful as Pingting, qualified to touch everything He Xia had attentively prepared for Pingting. She took Pingting's comb, slept on the linen Pingting once slept on, and touched the qin Pingting played.

In He Xia's eyes, there was no way that was a treasure. It was a torture weapon against He Xia.

Every qin sound from the Prince Consort Residence came from those sharp fingernails. Those two hands each clawed through He Xia's heart viciously.

Fengyin's two qin playing hands, rather than growing on its master, might as well be cut off and presented, bloody, in a box as a gift.

The Marquess of Jing-An returned all of the past humiliation and torture back to its original owner.

"Princess! Princess! What's wrong? Princess!" Luyi's voice came in fragments, trembling through the wooden door.

It rang out.

The people outside strained their ears, paying attention to the movements inside. Luyi called a few times, suddenly stopped for some reason. The inside of the room instantly quietened like death. A moment passed before Luyi started to scream again. "Someone! Someone come!"

"Someone come! The Princess has been frightened! Call the physician! Quickly call the physician!"

"Mister Guard, Mister Guards outside! I beg you, please go find the Prince Consort!"

"Princess...Princess...oh god, blood!" The wooden door suddenly began to sound, perhaps from being strongly hit by something. The guards jumped back in shock. There was someone's nails clawing messily from inside. "Blood, blood! Someone! Someone! Someone come..." Luyi cried out.

The guards felt rather scared thanks to her frantic calls. They stole a look at He Xia.

He Xia listened to Luyi's calls and instructed, "You may all leave. Without my permission, no one is to come."

The guards listened to the calls that was enough to give nightmares. They were dying to leave. The area was immediately wiped clean of people.

"Physicians, I beg you all, please go call the physician. Who, just who can..." Luyi kept on crying inside. The sounds of several collisions were heard as if she had gone back to Yaotian's side, knocking over several tables and chairs.

*Bang!*

The pot that held water spilled onto the ground.

"Princess, Princess, you're awake?" Luyi's voice was a little more collected. "Princess, are you all right? You scared me to death..."

"Luyi, it hurts..." That was Yaotian's voice.

A brief moment of silence.

"Blood, all this blood, why..." Yaotian's weak yet frightened voice came again.

“Princess, Princess! Don’t move...someone come! Save her! The Princess has been frightened into early labour, someone!” Luyi started to cry out again, even more piercing to the heart than before. “Prince Consort, please come quickly Prince Consort! The Princess is having early labour! Princess...Princess will die...”

The sparks in He Xia’s eyes began to flare up and burn, unextinguishable.

“Princess, Princess! Save her, save the Princess! I beg you to open the door! We need a physician, even a few herbs is fine!” The wooden door thudded ever so loudly as Luyi maniacally thumped the door, shouting at the very top of her hoarse voice.

“I beg you all, I beg you all! The Princess is having early labour! Physician, physician!”

“Prince Consort, Prince Consort, you are so cruel...”

Prince Consort, Prince Consort.

The Prince Consort of Yun Chang. There was none above him but one.

The one to coldly glance at everyone, but with a gentle lift of his lips, the maiden sitting on the throne was instantly captured out of the clouds.

The two had come together, despite their differences.

In the atrium well decorated with flowers, passion hid.

Remembering the wedding, he removed the coronet from her head. Yaotian sighed, “It’s the night of the wedding chamber, and the man in front of me is talented both literarily and militarily, a true hero. It’s just like a really good dream, so I’m a little afraid that it’s just a dream.”

Her smile in the candlelight seemed to be printed in his mind, like the reddish glow after a drink.

*Princess, my wife. It wasn’t a dream, but a nightmare.*

*Only one could be true, and it was a nightmare that no one could escape from.*

“Help! Someone come save the Princess...I beg you all...I beg you...” Luyi’s heartbreaking voice echoed in his ear.

He Xia’s handsome face twisted, a sudden burst of iciness in his palms. He abruptly lowered his head, only then realising he had grabbed a hold of the lock on the door at some point. He was surprised and immediately took a small step back, standing still once more.

“Someone come, save her! I beg you, save the Princess...”

“Prince Consort, you mustn’t be so cruel. I beg you, Prince Consort, the Princess is dying...”

Luyi’s rapidly diminishing voice continued to wail, “Even if you kill the Princess, does Prince Consort not want his own flesh and blood anymore? I beg you, Masters outside, please, please pass the message to the Prince Consort!”

*Kill the Princess?*

He Xia shook his head. No, he had never thought about killing her. He only thought of seizing all military power and take her throne, but never thought once about killing her.

Why did he have to kill her when she was his wife for this lifetime, his future queen. He once said to make the Princess become the noblest woman in the world.

He didn't want to harm her, he really didn't. But his wife wrote an Order, gathering up Officials to punish him. The letter had been concise and straight to the point, clearly stating that in the future, he would be sentenced to death.

Almost, just a little bit more, perhaps the one being locked up would be himself. The one bleeding would be him and the one being hacked to pieces would be him!

A nightmare, this was a nightmare.

The sound of Yaotian's screaming was sandwiched between Luyi's crying.

"Ah...ahhh! Luyi, I'm not going to make it....ah!"

"Princess, the physician...will soon...will soon come here..."

"No no, I don't want the physician. I want the Prince Consort...the Prince Consort..."

"Princess..."

"Hurry, find someone to call the Prince Consort over. Make him come here..."

Luyi let out her voice to cry, "Princess, the Prince Consort he..."

"Luyi, I want to see him...I won't make it. I want to see him. Hurry, he won't be able see me..."

Yaotian's weak voice was scattered, but it still had indescribable devotion.

*Princess!*

The He Xia who had been standing outside the door like a clay statue suddenly jerked a few times. He stumbled towards the door, his five fingers tightly enclosing around the cold and heavy metal lock.

Cold and heavy.

This was the lock on his heart, the lock on his life.

As long as the Princess remained, the matter of the Order, would continue over and over again. Nothing could change this outcome.

He Xia held onto the lock, his sweat merging with the metal, making his palms both wet and cold.

Yaotian was still moaning, "Prince Consort, go find the Prince Consort for me...he wouldn't refuse to see me...go find him...ah! It hurts so much..."

The hand He Xia had around the lock suddenly began to violently shake.

*Princess, Princess, I can't see you.*

*You are He Xia's wife, He Xia's one and only wife in this lifetime.*

*I don't hate you for letting Gui Changqing secretly try to control me. I don't hate you for making me lose Pingting. I don't hate you.*

*I just hate the skies, hate this nightmare, hate that you had to write an Order to sentence me to death and hate everything that made me unable to protect you.*

Hot tears began to drip down his face, twisted with pain.

He Xia touched the lock on the door and listened to Yaotian's cries and calls for him. His knees helplessly caved in.

Early next morning, a grave and solemn funeral was held, startling the peasants who were planning to work through another long day.

Far away, the Yun Chang Royal Residence seemed white, particularly desolate.

The peasants heard of the sad news. The pregnant Master of Yun Chang had gone into early labour due to her weak body. She died in the arms of the heartbroken Prince Consort.

What they didn't know was that very same night, several of the officials in the court had been secretly executed for various reasons.

It was a dark night in Dong Lin. Even the stars were silent.

Moran hid himself in the forest as he stared warily at the flickering sparks in the distance.

The sparks seemed to blot out the sky, forming an arc, tightly surrounding this patch of mountain forest they hid in.

Arrows were on strings, posed yet not firing.

This critical situation had been going on for several days. The final bit of strength of the Royal House of Dong Lin had been trapped, unable to move. Both ally and enemy sides understood that this calmness was simply a false impression before the bloodshed to follow.

The bushes beside him began to rustle.

"Who knows when He Xia is going to come?" Luoshang carefully came over until he was right beside Moran. He too stared out at the enemy that surrounded him for several days.

Moran whispered, "Even if He Xia came out from the capital of Yun Chang, he should've arrived by now. I reckon before tomorrow evening, they will definitely launch attack."

The rock on his heart seemed to become even heavier.

They were outnumbered and daunted by the army of Yun Chang opposite them. With just Moran and the remaining people beside him, even thinking about escaping from the battle alive was a luxury, let alone protecting the Queen.

Was Dong Lin, the country that once overpowered the four countries with its military power, really going to be ruined like this?

The two people hid in the forest, watching the figures in the enemy camp under the cover of night. As if unable to stand the oppressive atmosphere, Luoshang spoke in a low voice. "The Queen's illness has gotten worse again..." This man had always been optimistic but now he took on the tone of deep sorrow.



“Hush!” Moran suddenly urged, “Look.”

Luoshang followed his gaze and looked across. The soldiers and generals started moving. The camp began to bustle with activity, appearing to be getting ready to attack.

“It seems He Xia has arrived,” Luoshang whispered.

Moran coldly nodded. His gaze was sharp as he studied the enemy’s movements from far away. The enemy army orderly lined up on the hillside. They had a large number of soldiers from the siege. He Xia brought even more. The enemy Yun Chang army seemed to be in endless supply as they appeared in the horizon. Every squad had a captain with a flaming torch. From afar, it all seemed like a line of sparks stretched across the mountain.

Moran and Luoshang had accompanied Chu Beijie to all sorts of places, fought in numerous wars, but never once tried a battle with such a large gap in strength. Their hearts couldn’t help freeze.

Moran looked at Luoshang, grinding his teeth. “The decisive battle is approaching. You go protect the Queen, and I’ll take the men to resist here for a while.”

Luoshang looked at the flashing blades on the opposite side, dense like a forest, before looking back at the pitiful amount of soldiers behind him. He understood none of them would be able to survive this battle. He had been with Chu Beijie for many years and was used to seeing the difference between life and death. He knew this critical moment could not be dragged on. He lowered his voice, “Good brother, kill as many enemies as you can. We can compare who killed the most on the way to the afterlife.”

He whacked Moran’s shoulder and fell back into the dense forest to report the bad news to the Queen of Dong Lin.

*Wuuu...*

The long sound from the horn began to sound on the opposite hillside, travelling through to the skies.

*Boom, boom...*

After the horn sounded, the heavy drums began to boom. At first the rhythm stopped after every two or three strikes, as if the sky had finally spitted out a few drops of rain after several days of overcast.

Gradually, the rain began to fall. The drum gradually became more intensive, the rhythm faster and faster, the sound louder and louder. It seemed the earth had decided to follow the drum’s frightening momentum, causing all the listening Dong Lin soldiers’ hearts to thump faster and faster.

When the drumming came to the climax, the gracefully ordered army of Yun Chang finally began to move.

The sky was filled with the light of fire, reflecting blades, as they aggressively charged towards the patch of forest they had been surrounding.

“Stand up, the enemy is too big. Hiding is useless.” Moran stood in the forest he had been hiding in for so long. He turned to look at the other Dong Lin soldiers who had been hiding behind him. “The final battle has begun. Sons of Dong Lin, straighten your spines!”

The enemy general at the front was rapidly approaching them.

The metallic footsteps before them had broken silence, particularly the forest’s tranquillity.

The representative of the Dong Lin Royal House – the Queen – and the final remnants of Dong Lin’s military power were once hidden in this silence.

Moran threw away concerns about life or death. He looked at the massive Yun Chang army and likened them to a cloud of birds that gradually swarmed towards them. He displayed the courage Chu Beijie honed and was not afraid in the slightest as he took out the sword from his waist, quietly waiting for the two sides to meet.

The raging fire slowly approached, dying the forest trees red.

Moran led his comrades who shared a common destiny. They stood straight in the cold evening wind.

Everyone held their breath.

*Dong Lin, the place that I was born and grew up, I will shed my blood and bury my body for you.*

No one was afraid. They once followed the one and only Duke of Zhen-Bei. They have seen the small gap between life and death, as well as ultimate glory.

The despair over certain death, forced ruthlessness into their eyes.

The army of Yun Chang pressed closer and closer, the hooves becoming more rapid.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” The Yun Chang soldiers growled, causing a terribly giant sound that echoed in the mountains.

The general at the very front of the Yun Chang army had his sword ready. His horse ran freely. The army was like a massive beast whose shackles were finally unlocked. They charged at Moran and the rest at an incredibly fast speed.

*Come.*

Moran’s hand tightened around his sword.

He knew he was bound to be swallowed up by this flood, just like how Dong Lin was bound to become history in this firelight.

“Kill! Kill!”

The incoming flames clearly lit up their faces.

Calvary, spears, and swords covered their line of sight. The mighty force of thousands of soldiers brought the roar of the wind as they surged forward. The dignified air no longer had the strength to act as barrier against the two parties. Moran’s gaze glued onto the general at the very front of the Yun Chang army, who was undoubtedly the main commander of this decisive battle.

“Kill!”

The fast horses rushed in front of him. The enemy general swung down at Moran’s head from his horse.

The instant Moran raised his sword, he heard the sound of wind.

*Fwish.*

Drums rumbled and battle cries split the skies yet he heard the sound of wind, as if all the drums, battle cries, were all less important than that slight sound of wind

“Ah!” There was a piercing scream which appeared to be from the mouth of the enemy general on the horse. His hand was posed above Moran’s head before his body began to violently shake and fall stiffly off his horse.

A glistening golden arrow had pierced into his head, straight through the forehead.

It was a good shot. The arrow was fast and extremely accurate.

The two sides who had been prepared to fight to death were shocked to a standstill by this horrible scene.

The weapons were almost about to hit when the main commander of Yun Chang suddenly died in a most bizarre way. It shocked the Yun Chang soldiers more than anything.

For a moment, for a single fleeting moment.

The main commander actually fell just before the battle had actually begun.

General Chengjing had died.

General Chengjing of the Weimo Regiment, one of Yun Chang’s seven regiments, had been killed by an arrow.

Who had such ability?

As the arrow pierced from the back of his head, the archer had to be behind. The Yun Chang soldiers were rather scared as they turned to look behind their own army.

They saw.

On the hillside rear, a figure on a horse appeared.

Moran studied the figure. His body began to quake. He was so excited he could barely hold onto the sword in his hands.

Was this real?

The rider had one hand on the reins, the other hand on a bow. He had stopped at the top of the hillside. Even though the moon was bright, the crowd couldn’t see the man’s face. In the haziness, they could only see the light that filtered out from his sides. He was facing Yun Chang’s army of several thousand, yet was all alone, like a god who had come into the mortal world.

So far away...

Was he the owner of the golden arrow?

The cavalry units tried to answer the questions amongst themselves until the figure pulled out an arrow and drew the bow. The motion was as fluid as water, the sound of breaking wind appeared again. Its momentum was terrifying. In just a blink of the eye, the golden light flashed by.

“Ah!” came another scream. It broke the quiet world caused by the shocking death of Chengjing.

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, another lieutenant of Yun Chang fell off his horse, landing beside the body of Chengjing.

Utterly terrifying!

The Yun Chang army began to rustle with fear. Who was he? Who had such terrifying abilities?

Like a struck of lightning, the rattled soldiers of Yun Chang were shocked again by this second arrow. They finally remembered they were on the merciless battle.

But some people reacted quicker than them.

The opposition's swords quickly flung them off.

"The Duke! The Duke has returned!" Moran chopped down a few of the Yun Chang soldiers who lost their fighting spirit. His face was full of surprise at this miraculous encounter. He howled, "Brothers, yell with me! The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned!"

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned! The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned!"

The sound of extremely delighted howls filled the remote hillside.

The title, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, was more effective than any other weapon in slashing away the Yun Chang army's morale.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei once lead the army of Dong Lin and unnerved the whole world.

Even Yun Chang's god of war, the Prince Consort, didn't dare underestimate the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

The man, amongst tens of thousands of soldiers, took away General Chengjing's life with a single arrow.

Chu Beijie had his horse stopped on the hillside in the moonlight. The Yun Chang army saw an even more terrifying seen. Figures of men continued to appear from Chu Beijie's side, appearing behind the rear of the Yun Chang army.

On the other side of the hill, Dong Lin actually had soldiers led by the Duke of Zhen-Bei hidden in ambush.

They'd been tricked!

They had really been ambushed by the Duke of Zhen-Bei from behind. This completely shattered the remaining morale of the Yun Chang army. No one knew who was the first, but someone screamed before throwing down the spear in his hands, running elsewhere to escape.

"Duke of Zhen-Bei! It's the Duke of Zhen-Bei!"

"Run...run!"

The defeated soldiers were like a fallen mountain. Without their lead and vice commanders, the Yun Chang army became a pile of scattered dust.

Moran led his men, surging from behind to kill. After seeing the legendary missing Chu Beijie suddenly appear, he knew the Yun Chang soldiers who dropped their weapons would never summon the courage to resist again.

"Kill!"

"Ahhh!"

The screams continued. The escaping Yun Chang army was like an uncontrollable flood, oozing in every direction.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, the once missing foothold of Dong Lin, had returned.

The forest, hillside, and land underneath the moon were filled with the smell of blood.

Moran was too busy to bother chasing the collapsing Yun Chang army. He stepped over the floor covered in Yun Chang soldiers as he sprinted towards the figure on the hillside.

He never sprinted so fast in his life before until he could see that familiar face, the calm expression he thought he'd never be able to see.

"Duke!" With all his bloody wounds, Moran pounced at Chu Beijie's feet. "You...You're finally back..."

He had always been calm and reserved, but at this moment, he was delighted beyond control. The thousands of words in his heart wasn't able to be formed at all, so he just burst into tears.

The Dong Lin soldiers that rushed behind him were equally delighted. All of them knelt with a thump, some of them not able to stop their tears either.

Chu Beijie pulled Moran up, shouting, "Men on the battlefield should bleed not cry. What are you crying for?" He carefully studied Moran's bleeding face for a while before his voice became serious. "Moran, you've done good." When he heard of Dong Lin's people being trapped, he rushed nonstop, finally saving Moran and the others. He himself was quite delighted but wasn't used to revealing it in front of such a crowd. He asked, "Is Sister-in-Law all right?"

"The Queen is in the forest. Fortunately Duke has arrived at the right time." Talking about these serious matters, Moran retrieved the excited expression on his face. His face darkened slightly as he whispered, "Duke, the Queen's illness has gotten worse."

Chu Beijie was silent at this. "I'll go see her." He then turned, his voice becoming a lot more gentle. "Pingting, will you come with me?"

Only then did Moran realise there was a graceful figure behind Chu Beijie. He couldn't help being shocked, "Miss Bai?"

Pingting took off her veil. "Moran, long time no see." She smiled faintly and then turned to Chu Beijie. "I'll go with you."

She let Chu Beijie help her onto the horse and gently put her hand in Chu Beijie's large palm. The two rode together, down the hillside and into the forest.

The rest of the people went down the hill, returning to the tiny camp inside the forest together.

When they got closer towards the camp, they happened to see Luoshang maniacally bolt out. He almost collided with Chu Beijie who had just dismounted.

Luoshang raised his head and saw Chu Beijie's face, screaming, "It's really the Duke? It wasn't a joke?"

The impossible miracle suddenly happened. He was so excited that he forgot about the hierarchy and grabbed onto Chu Beijie's hand.

Chu Beijie patted his shoulder, glancing him with appreciation. “Attaboy, you’ve grown up. I’m going to see Sister-in-Law first and we’ll talk later.” He then led Pingting into the tent, leaving Luoshang rooted to his spot in disbelief.

He suddenly grabbed onto Moran who had been following them. His face was really quite serious as he asked, “We didn’t meet the Duke because we’re already on the way to the afterlife, right?”

## Chapter 63

The inside of the tent was dimly lit by candle.

Chu Beijie led Pingting through the tent flap, immediately seeing the Queen lying on the bed. Her once silky black hair had almost gone completely white.

This graceful queen of a country’s face was gray and defeated. Fine wrinkles had formed due to worry, covering her once exquisite and beautiful face.

She had accompanied the King through his final years and suffered more than enough torment as Dong Lin fell.

“Sister-in-Law.” Chu Beijie tiptoed towards the bedside, whispering softly.

The Queen’s long lashes began to flutter as she opened her eyes that had its former glory. It took a while before the face she saw came into focus.

“You’ve returned.” The Queen weakly breathed in, not having strength to articulate her words. “I heard you drove away the Yun Chang soldiers surrounding us.”

“Sister-In-Law, you’ve been suffering.”

The Queen shook her head, squeezing a wry smile onto her face. Her gaze shifted beyond Chu Beijie and was suddenly surprised.

Chu Beijie seemed to notice. He took a step back and held onto Pingting’s limp hand to calm her down.

The atmosphere in the tent began to feel unusually stiff.

The Queen’s gaze stopped on Pingting for a very long time.

“Bai Pingting?” Her voice was very low as she slowly spat out the three syllables between her teeth, a past that had chewed at her for so long.

Pingting bent down, bowing deeply. “Queen.”

“Bai Pingting, Miss Bai...” The Queen said, “Please come here, let me look at you.”

Pingting answered, stepping forward and stopping in front of the Queen’s bed.

In the dim candlelight, two complicated expressions met.

This was the first time they had clearly seen the other’s face.

While the past disappeared with the wind, memories didn't easily fade.

There was so much pain, love and hate. From being forced to leave the secluded residence, the queen losing her son, Chu Beijie losing Pingting and Dong Lin losing Chu Beijie.

And under the hooves of Yun Chang's invasion, Dong Lin too had lost Dong Lin.

They had been tangled by fate, hurting others and hurting themselves, but only today did they finally know the other's face.

The Queen quietly looked at Pingting, asking, "Do you hate me?"

Pingting answered with another question, "Does Queen hate me?"

All of the past in their mind was like a rock in lightning, disappearing in a single moment, leaving the witness to sigh at the remnants. It was no more than a handful of smoke.

The Queen's gaze shifted away from Pingting's face, stopping on Chu Beijie beside her. She faintly sighed.

"When the King died, he asked me a question." The Queen's lonely expression contained her memories, "The King asked that if we too, were born between enemy countries and directly opposing positions, would we still be willing to stay by each other?"

She didn't go on and her face revealed that she was deeply in recollection.

"What did Sister-In-Law reply?" After what seemed a long time, Chu Beijie finally opened his mouth to ask.

The Queen looked at Chu Beijie, a faint smile appearing at the corners of his lips. She didn't answer Chu Beijie's question, whispering, "The King had always been hoping that the Duke of Zhen-Bei would return to succeed Dong Lin's throne. I can finally be reassured and go now."

"Sister-In-Law." Chu Beijie half-knelt by the bed. He gently held onto her hand, carefully looking at this lady of the Royal Residence who had painstakingly protected Dong Lin for all these years. They were family. A long time ago, because he was very close to his brother, he knew his sister-in-law very well. They had banquets together, sat on the same platforms while watching dance, and laughed together while her sons played. "You will get better."

"It doesn't matter whether I get better or not." The Queen faintly smiled, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, we've all done a lot of wrong."

Thinking of his brother that had always pampered him, Chu Beijie painfully closed his eyes. He lowered his voice, "Chu Beijie is at fault for disappointing Brother and making Sister-in-Law suffer."

The Queen glanced at his two eyes, tiredly closing her own. The scene of her husband's death slowly floated in her thoughts. The scene of the Royal Residence of Dong Lin in flames followed.

She released a long sigh. "Who has never made a single fault?" She looked at Pingting, her eyes lowered and silent. "Haven't the King and I made mistakes before? That day when we agreed to He Xia's private arrangement, we did everything we could think of to separate Miss Bai who the Duke of Zhen-Bei loves as much as his life in exchange to disband the allied army between the Yun Chang and Bei Mo. We knew it was wrong, yet we still made the wrong decision. In comparison, Miss Bai is the one who has never made a single fault on purpose."

Pingting shook her head, her lowered eyelashes rising to reveal her distinct eyes that glanced at Chu Beijie. She sighed, "Queen is wrong. Pingting knew the world was about to become a mess and pretended to be dead, hiding due to selfish resentment. I refused to explain Duke's misunderstanding, hesitated to act, resulting in loss of life. Even when I knew it was wrong, I refused to go back."

Her gaze met with Chu Beijie's.

Moran and Luoshang were waiting outside the tent. The aftermath of their excitement had not even begun to disperse. Even though their surroundings were pitch black due to being deep in the forest and the sun was far from rising, everyone's eyes seemed like bright lights. It seemed as if they had already seen the rising sun of the next morning.

"It's true, it's true..." Every once in a while, Luoshang would murmur these words, his face full of joy.

Moran vigorously patted him on the shoulder. He turned around to look at the brothers who survived through the tough battles with him. Not long ago, they had sworn to die in battle, not expecting that even one could make it out alive. Unspeakable joy coursed through him.

They waited for a long time when the tent flap moved slightly.

Luoshang leapt to his feet, "They're coming."

All of the people stood up, their energy a hundredfold. They eagerly eyed the tent flap.

Chu Beijie and Pingting came out.

"Sister-In-Law has already fully given Dong Lin's royal authority to me. From now on, all of Dong Lin's troops must listen to me."

Chu Beijie's calm and steady voice entered everyone's ears.

He had always been the legitimate Dong Lin Royal House heir. There was none who didn't accept this handover procedure, no matter how simple.

"The war situation is urgent; we have no time to spend reminiscing." Chu Beijie looked up at the sky, "The Yun Chang army collapsing is only due to their army's resolve in a mess. They haven't been weakened all that much in reality and will rapidly regroup. We must immediately evacuate this area before their flag and horns are raised again. Moran."

"Here!"

"Immediately rectify the army, prepare to depart."

"Yes!"

"Luoshang."

"Here!"

"You're in charge of the Queen's safety. Select a good horse. There are some soft hay in the carriage." Chu Beijie lowered his voice to instruct, "Be careful, don't let her be jolted."

"I shall go do it immediately."



Chu Beijie was concise with his commands and consecutively made several of them. These people accompanied him through fire & water and long gotten used to his commands. Seeing their Duke's return, they immediately recovered their backbones with newfound agility. There was a chain of "Yes!", "Yes!" as the crowd hurried off to complete their own tasks.

The entire camp's movement was fast. In less than half an hour, everything was prepared. Each person came to report back to Chu Beijie. And so, the camp seemed to disperse on the spot as they hid their traces before heading towards the south of the gorge.

Chu Beijie sent another party out to prepare all sorts of false alarms and tracks on the way. These would confuse the enemy so the army of Yun Chang wouldn't find their route.

When they stopped to rest for the night, Chu Beijie summoned all of the generals. What seemed like ages, Dong Lin finally had their very first military conference in the open woodlands.

Chu Beijie had been living in seclusion for two years. Once upon coming out, he immediately rushed to save the Dong Lin Royal House from being surrounded and had yet to have a comprehensive understanding of the four countries' current status.

Moran deliberately described the current situation to begin. He concluded, "He Xia has gotten the rights for a treasury and granary as well as significantly raised the taxes towards the military. The rewards to be in the Yun Chang army has temporarily significantly increase. After being baptised with countless battles, as well as He Xia's personal honing, the Yun Chang army of today is no longer the dormant, self-protecting army of the past.

"But the once more official armies of Dong Lin and Bei Mo, have all been defeated by He Xia's Yun Chang army." Recalling the current terrible situation, Luoshang solemnly added, "The only army that can barely resist Yun Chang would be Gui Le's official army."

"Gui Le is currently in civil strife. The King He Su and General Le Zhen are opposing each other. They barely have enough to care about themselves, not to mention the army of Yun Chang."

Ruohan said, "My Bei Mo has a few secret strongholds for possible recruits to enlist at. Ever since Main General Ze Yin's open challenge to He Xia, the number of young men enlisting increase day by day. The current figure has increased to more than ten thousand, but we don't have weapons nor horses.

"After the defeat in the Battle of Fuzha River, our Dong Lin has completely lost its former military strength. Several of the people lost hope so they fled, while the rest of the people are here." Moran turned back, looking at the cold and rather empty looking camp. "Including the wounded, we don't have more than eight thousand."

A moment of silence.

In comparison, Yun Chang already had assembled a massive army of more than three hundred thousand. Even assuming by full strength, they only had fifteen hundred.

After a day of travelling, their excitement from their first sight of Chu Beijie had gradually calmed, as the grim reality that lay ahead started to kick in.

They had the Duke of Zhen-Bei who could lead troops, but what about the horses?

Chu Beijie pondered for a while. He held up a hand. "Everyone, go get some rest. We still have to rapidly journey on tomorrow as we mustn't let the Yun Chang army catch up to us."

Everyone knew the main advisor needed some time to think so they all parted. Only Moran trailed behind Chu Beijie as he walked like how he always accompanied him before his Master slept.

The two people enjoyed the quiet evening breeze. They watched the flickering fire lights slowly part and diminish.

“You didn’t mention Chen Mu just now.”

“General Chen Mu...he died in battle when the Yun Chang army attacked the capital.” Moran’s voice was grave, “The Senior Official was too frail and was unable to come with us to evacuate. I heard that he didn’t want to suffer the humiliation of capture, so he committed suicide by poison.”

Both of the moods were equally heavy. Chu Beijie heaved a sigh and held his hands behind his back as he silently studied outside.

This was Moran’s first chance to privately talk with Chu Beijie since their reunion. His heart held countless questions and he couldn’t help say, “Duke, Miss Bai she...”

“She’s still alive. She forgave me and returned to my side.”

“That day...wasn’t she said to be already with Duke’s...”

Chu Beijie suddenly stopped walking. His resolute face revealed a hint of pain. Moran had been with him for many years and had very rarely seen the Duke be so unable to control his own emotions. He secretly regretted saying the wrong thing but heard Chu Beijie’s hoarse whisper. “She has experienced far too much. Surviving was already difficult enough, not to mention while protecting her child? I...”

His fist clenched and unclenched, and clenched again.

“...I just can’t ask her.”

That suffering child was most likely gone.

After seeing Pingting, he had been travelling without stop to try solve this chaotic situation, from the dense forest spanning miles to Jiangling Ancient City, then to save Moran and the rest. He hadn’t had much time at all to discuss the past with Pingting.

It wasn’t really that much at all, but he, the dignified Duke of Zhen-Bei who could face thousands of soldiers without batting an eyelid, couldn’t find the slightest hint of courage whenever this problem was mentioned. He knew no matter how sweet his words or how much he thanked to skies, he could never summon enough courage.

He couldn’t dare imagine the Yun Chang soldiers hunting Pingting, falling into all sorts of treacherous circumstances, her devastating loss of the child in her belly.

And perhaps this tragic matter had already become a bloody wound on Pingting’s heart, one she would refuse to talk about even today?

Chu Beijie stood outside his own tent, his mixed feelings made him unable to take a step further.

Moran’s question had directly stepped on the thorn in his heart. He really wanted to pull it out, but if he did, wouldn’t it cause Pingting to be hurt again?

She had painstakingly returned to his side. Chu Beijie would rather give away his life than letting Pingting feel the slightest trace of sadness

That child...

“How long does Duke want to stand outside?” asked a gentle voice. The tent entrance was lifted as Pingting appeared from the inside the door.

She walked out, taking Chu Beijie’s hand in hers, leading him into the tent. She smiled, “Pingting has always acknowledged Duke’s ability to lead troops. No matter how grim the situation is, there isn’t a need for Duke to feel so distressed. What on earth have Moran and Duke been talking about to make Duke reveal such a depressed expression?”

Chu Beijie held onto Pingting’s soft hand, warm and gentle. He tightened his grip and felt that heaven would be like this, delightfully beautiful. He thought of how his one question he wanted to ask would destroy it all and gritted his teeth, finally making his choice.

“Pingting, that day in the secluded residence...”

“Duke, the spies we sent out have returned.” At the most inappropriate time ever, the report was made outside the tent.

For some reason however, Chu Beijie secretly sighed in relief. He hurriedly went outside, “Speak!”

In the capital of Yun Chang, all faces were without colour.

“What?” He Xia, dressed in white, slapped the table before standing. He was astonished. “Chu Beijie suddenly appeared?”

“Correct.” The messenger was kneeling, not daring to raise his head. “Several soldiers personally witnessed the Duke of Zhen-Bei on the hillside. Just a single arrow was enough to shoot General Chengjing to death.”

“How many people did he have?”

“I have asked the soldiers, but they all said they didn’t know.”

He Xia fumed, “When two armies are clashing, how can you not know how many men appeared in the ambush from behind?”

“Report to Prince Consort. Back then...when they saw the Duke of Zhen-Bei, they were all scared and confused. The army was defeated and dispersed before the armies even clashed...”

“Bastards!” He Xia yelled.

The messenger soldier was like a cicada in winter, not daring to make a single sound.

“Tens of thousands of soldiers ran away at the sight of a single silhouette on the hillside before the armies even clashed.” He Xia started pacing back and forth in the room, seething, “What the heck was Chengjing doing? Even if he was still alive, I’d punish him for not being strict enough when training his soldiers.”

Ever since the death of Princess Yaotian, the Prince Consort completely grasped the royal authority of Yun Chang. A vicious evil seemed to be unconsciously present in his eyes, chilling his audiences.

The messenger knelt right against the ground. Listening to He Xia's thuds overhead, each sound seemed to drum at his own heart until it banged and rattled. He suddenly heard a voice outside, reporting, "Prince Consort, the messenger stationed at the Royal Residence of Dong Lin has arrived."

"Let him come in."

The door was pushed open, and another dusty-looking messenger came in to kneel. He panted as he reported, "Report to Prince Consort, the Duke of Zhen-Bei suddenly appeared in Dong Lin's capital, killing several Yun Chang soldiers."

"What's that?" He Xia stopped, "Elaborate."

"Six days ago, the Duke of Zhen-Bei appeared outside the Dong Lin capital, using a bow and arrow to kill several soldiers stationed on the city walls."

"Why didn't you send pursuers?"

"The General immediately sent troops out from the city, but once the Duke of Zhen-Bei finished provoking, he immediately led the other riders beside him away. By the time we hurried to outside the city, they disappeared into the distance. The night was late too, so their traces were difficult to find."

"Late at night?" He Xia narrowed his eyes, "He was at the capital six nights ago?"

"Yes."

He Xia looked at the messenger who arrived first. "Just then, you said Chu Beijie appeared on the hillside six days ago, before the trapped Dong Lin Royal House in the dense forest?"

"Yes, Prince Consort."

"These two places are too far apart, how could Chu Beijie possibly be in two places at once?"

"That...is..."

"Was his face clearly seen?" He Xia asked the messenger sent from Dong Lin's capital.

"His face wasn't seen. According to the soldiers at the scene, the people around him were all shouting 'the Duke of Zhen-Bei'..."

"Imbecile, you determined he was the Duke of Zhen-Bei just because the other party yelled a bit? How could such a ridiculous ploy trick me?" He Xia shouted, "Someone! Take him away!"

"Have mercy! Prince Consort, have mercy on me! I don't dare speak nonsense, I can't possibly stage a ploy! All of the people in Dong Lin are saying the Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned, but whether it's true or not, I will definitely investigate it in detail..." The messenger repeatedly kowtowed.

Dongzhuo hurried through the door with a letter. Seeing He Xia's ashen expression, he glanced back at the messengers desperately pleading for mercy. He asked, "Master?"

He Xia saw he was holding an army report and knew it was something important. He ordered, "I can't be bothered, so I'll let you go for now. You can go."

The two messengers' lives were spared. They stumbled out

“Master, Chu Beijie appeared at the Bei Mo capital.”

“When?”

“Six days ago.”

He Xia sneered, “Six days ago, Chu Beijie appeared in three places, Dong Lin capital, the forest, and Bei Mo’s capital. Even idiots know what’s going on.”

Dongzhuo suddenly understood, “Someone is using Chu Beijie’s fame and is impersonating him to shake my army’s morale. True though, Chu Beijie has been missing for so long. He should have long appeared when the Dong Lin Royal Residence was being attacked, so there’s no way he’d suddenly appear at such a time!

He Xia closed his eyes for a few moments, listening to Dongzhuo’s words. He opened his eyes again, an excited ray of light jumping in his eyes.

“No, it actually shows that Chu Beijie really has appeared. This plan of appearing in three places is defence by seeing the enemy’s first attack, trying to trick us into believing someone else is impersonating Chu Beijie. It’s a pity it can trick others but can’t trick me.”

Dongzhuo was shocked and took a while before taking a deep breath of cold air. He raised his concerns, “If it really is Chu Beijie himself, will Master gather up the army and immediately go to Dong Lin to defeat him?”

“Chu Beijie specialises in hiding his trail. Do you know how many resources and time he needs to prepare for a battle in the vast Dong Lin?” He Xia’s handsome features hid a sharpness. The corners of his lips lifted slightly, “Send an Order, prepare to depart. I will head for Gui Le.”

Dongzhuo’s expression was puzzled. “Fei Zhaoxing and Shang Lu have already been sent to Gui Le and are enough to finish off Gui Le while it is in civil strife. Why must Master go himself?”

“When fighting a giant, attack its Achilles heel. Dongzhuo, do you know where Chu Beijie’s Achilles heel is?” He Xia’s bright eyes swivelled, giving Dongzhuo a profound look.

“Chu Beijie’s Achilles heel?” Dongzhuo had no answer to the question. His eyebrows furrowed as he pondered.

He Xia saw he didn’t know and chuckled. “Chu Beijie’s Achilles heel lies in the two words, soldier and horse.”

Straight to the point.

Dongzhuo suddenly jolted with realisation.

Dong Lin and Bei Mo’s elite soldiers have already been lost. If Chu Beijie wanted to gain a large amount of soldiers, he would have to try his luck with the Gui Le army.

He Xia need to immediately reach Gui Le. As long as he ruined the Gui Le army, he would break Chu Beijie’s last dream of getting troops.

A housewife cannot cook a meal without rice. Without soldiers and horses, what could Chu Beijie do?

Even if he was a God, there was no way his strength was enough to fight against the massive Yun Chang army.

After everything was decided, the two people stepped out of the office one after the other.

“Even now, I hardly believe Chu Beijie would suddenly appear.” Dongzhuo mumbled as he walked, “Why on earth would he come out of the mountains for no reason at all.”

“Chu Beijie would not have come out for any reason at all.”

“Master?”

“There must be a reason.” He Xia replied in a serious voice. His bright eyes swivelled towards the rear courtyard. In the shadows, he saw the room Pingting once lived in.

The room door remained tightly shut.

In this huge world, who else but her had the power to bring the devastated Chu Beijie out of the mountains?

## Chapter 64

Chu Beijie spent the last few days on the road while hiding his trails. He constantly sent out elite spies, assessing the news from all sorts of places.

They finally found a secluded place to set the camp. Afterwards everyone gathered inside the tattered tents, discussing various things again.

“Miss Bai’s plan was indeed very useful.” Ruohan was pleased to report, “On the day the Duke of Zhen-Bei appeared in the forest, I followed Miss Bai’s words and arranged a few men who had a similar stature to the Duke of Zhen-Bei to appear before normal Yun Chang soldiers. I also got them to announce themselves as the Duke of Zhen-Bei so the entire Yun Chang army’s morale will panic.

Luoshang excitedly nodded. “This tactic killed two birds with one stone. The normal soldiers of Yun Chang were terrified out of their guts, spreading rumours everywhere. However, it’s simply impossible for one person to appear at so many places. The ranking soldiers and generals of the Yun Chang army would all think it’s an enemy’s trick. Even if He Xia knows about, he’ll just think it’s a rumour. As long as he doesn’t immediately send troops to crush us, we still have a chance to recuperate and train.”

“That little thieving He Xia definitely fell for it.” Sen Rong heartily laughed, “The spies reported He Xia has received urgent reports from the various locations. Not only did he not assemble his army to head for Dong Lin but immediately left for Gui Le. That just shows he doesn’t believe the Duke of Zhen-Bei is truly in Dong Lin. Ha ha, all in all, Miss Bai’s defence in seeing the enemy’s first attack is one clever trick.”

Pingting sat next to Chu Beijie. Although she was being praised again and again by everyone, her elegant expression didn’t light up at all. She gently sighed, revealing a wry smile. “Pingting feels rather ashamed. If He Xia personally rushes to Gui Le, this means Pingting’s plan to confuse the enemy has been seen through.”

“What?” The smiles on their faces froze for a moment.

Chu Beijie lightly held onto Pingting’s small hand under the table. He turned to look at Pingting, calmly laughing. “The day He Xia reaches Gui Le, the day the army of Gui Le will be destroyed. To us, it means we will never be able to get help from the troops of Gui Le. It will become a lost dream.”

The Yun Chang army was increasingly growing day by day. Contrarily, the armies of Bei Mo and Dong Lin had collapsed. If even the army of Gui Le were to be crushed, then where else could they find sufficient strength to oppose He Xia's power?

They couldn't possibly go head on against Yun Chang's tens of thousands with their fifteen hundred, right?

The generals who were just celebrating over tricking He Xia instantly had their expressions darken.

If He Xia gets rid of the Gui Le army, he would no longer have anything to worry about. With Yun Chang's current strength, it was likely all rebel troops of the future would form in the palm of his hand. He could toy with them like a cat savouring its play time with a mouse.

Chu Beijie saw everyone's confidence drop. He smiled, defending Pingting. "Miss Bai's tactics are still clever, perhaps you have a way to deal with this bad situation before us?"

Pingting returned him with a gentle gaze. She sincerely replied, "Why ask me? Duke looks very confident enough, obviously already knowing a way out."

Chu Beijie broke out laughing. "You're testing me." He squeezed her hand even tighter under the table.

The Queen of Dong Lin's condition had improved slightly. She too was there, leaning propped up against a cushion. At this time, she interrupted them, "I've almost watched the Duke of Zhen-Bei grow up, so I am completely confident in the Duke's ability to lead troops. He will always calmly cope, no matter how terrible the situation is. But it's Miss Bai's abilities that I would really like to see."

She was Chu Beijie's Sister-in-Law. Whenever she spoke, her words were never light. Pingting knew that she was testing her own abilities but didn't mind. Her gaze shifted, eyeing the tent once, before her delicate lips parted. "Yun Chang has many soldiers while my side has few which is He Xia's biggest advantage. At the moment, we must change his advantage into his disadvantage."

Moran frowned. "Of course turning advantage to disadvantage is the most ideal plan, but how could we do that?"

Sen Rong was the most direct. "Almost impossible."

"How isn't it possible?" Pingting faintly returned with another question. Although her voice was light, it held a hidden self-confidence. Each word was like a bead clattering into a jade bowl as she clearly analysed, "The reason why the Yun Chang army has such immense strength is because they have taken in a large number of captives and prisoners of war. General Sen Rong, do you know how many soldiers of the massive Yun Chang army have been single-handedly trained by He Xia himself?"

Luoshang answered the question before Sen Rong. "At the moment, the Yun Chang army is composed of two factions. One faction is made up of prisoners of war from various other countries while the other is the official Yun Chang army. Of course the prisoners of war joined halfway so their loyalty isn't particularly high. As for the Yun Chang official army, they were never originally part of He Xia's men anyway. If the big changes were to occur in the Yun Chang, He Xia would find it difficult to control the situation."

"Which is also the reason why He Xia has resorted to a high pay system. He would rather arouse resentment amongst the peasants to conquer the four countries in the shortest time and with any means possible. He must achieve his goals while he can still control them. He can't afford a large-scale moment of unrest in the army." Chu Beijie added.

After all, he was only a Prince Consort leading an army. Above him, was the dead but still present Royal House of Dong Lin. Below him are the generals and officials that have yet to fully acknowledge him. Outside, he has the furious

Dong Lin and Bei Mo soldiers who have yet to surrender. The seemingly brilliant army of Yun Chang is in fact built without a solid foundation.”

He Xia was deeply aware of this.

“He was never such a bad person, but...” Pingting’s face inadvertently had a passing hint of vague sadness. She cheered up before continuing, “What we must do now is to cause great disturbance within the Yun Chang army.”

Now that a clear goal appeared, the dispirited generals instantly cheered up.

“Wonderful!” Sen Rong began to laugh and applauded. “Rather than painstakingly expanding our own army, it’s better to destroy the enemy’s army.”

Moran was relatively calmer. He rationally examined, “Easier said than done. He Xia is a famous general who has his own way with training soldiers. The Yun Chang army won’t become chaotic so easily.”

“Moran is right. To cause a riot in the Yun Chang army, we have to approach from multiple sides. To be honest, someone has already done the first for us.” Chu Beijie looked encouragingly at Moran, “Moran should be able to guess who I’m talking about.”

Due to the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s direct address, Moran carefully thought for a moment. His eyes suddenly brightened. He raised his head. “That’s right, Bei Mo’s Main General Ze Yin did it. He openly challenged He Xia before Yun Chang’s several thousands of soldiers with just a single horse and himself. Even though he failed, he managed to injure He Xia’s shoulder. This matter has been secretly spread throughout the land. He Xia can be injured. This undoubtedly left a hidden scar in the hearts of the normal soldiers who revere He Xia like a god, as well as the deeply revered He Xia himself.”

As expected, he answered correctly. Chu Beijie revealed a pleased smile at this subordinate who followed him for all these years. He nodded in appreciation and sighed. “Even though Ze Yin was one of my opponents, I am extremely impressed by the courageous strength in his blood.”

“A heroic man.” Luoshang agreed.

Ruohan and Sen Rong were generals alongside Ze Yin for many years too. Hearing their former Main General, they couldn’t help tear up a little.

“I believe the second has already been done by someone else.” The Queen of Dong Lin also entered the discussion. “That is, the news of the Duke of Zhen-Bei appearing everywhere. The Duke of Zhen-Bei and the Marquess of Jing-An are the two widely acclaimed generals in this world. Ever since the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s disappearance, everyone has viewed the Marquess of Jing-An as an invincible war god. That’s why, the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s appearance shook the image of invincibility He Xia had finally established within the army of Yun Chang.”

Chu Beijie revealed a bitter smile. He turned to look at Pingting. “I really am a bit ashamed. Back when I saw He Xia at Gui Le’s borders, I should have used the tactic of feigned retreat. I should have pretended to retreat but actually forcefully clash with He Xia, leaving behind history in which the Duke of Zhen-Bei defeated the Marquess of Jing-An on the battlefield. That way, my appearance would shock the soldiers He Xia leads today even more.”

Pingting grinned at him, before whispering, “Duke seems to have forgotten that back then, Pingting was plotting for the Gui Le army. If you did forcefully clash, I would help Master so Duke may not actually get much out of it.”

Chu Beijie caught the glimpse of intelligence in her eyes. All of his hairs felt like they wanted to dance for joy. He smiled sheepishly, “I overestimated myself, please forgive me, Advisor Pingting.”



Their gazes lightly touched, causing their cheeks to redden and their hearts to thump. It seemed like they had lots of loving words in their throats, dying to happily pour out towards the other. Unfortunately they were in front of a crowd, discussing military affairs that involved life and death which could not be taken lightly. Pingting lowered her gaze, wanting to take out her hand from under the table but Chu Beijie's grip around hers had already tightened with just the slightest twitch.

"The third, I believe, is within Yun Chang. He Xia is only a Prince Consort. This title isn't particularly high or low, but rather embarrassing."

"That's why he is in such a rush to build a new country, so he can officially ascend to the throne as the King, straightening up his rank."

Ruohan coldly replied, "It isn't that easy to erase a country's centuries-old Royal House. There are definitely some Yun Chang officials and generals who are unsatisfied with He Xia, but like how he dealt with Yun Chang's Official General, he would definitely think of ideas to persecute those Yun Chang people who don't agree with him."

"I heard Princess Yaotian of Yun Chang's death was suspicious. I bet He Xia not only dares to go against the generals or officials who dislikes him, but even his wife too."

As Pingting listened, her face fell.

Sen Rong seemed to be quite excited though, "Their struggling under the surface, so we should take this opportunity to succeed. We use this excuse to set up rumours about He Xia harming Princess Yaotian, causing the morale of the army to shake as they have always been loyal to the Royal House."

"Shouldn't we try to contact the generals who are secretly being persecuted by He Xia? Maybe they will betray him and surrender to our side," suggested Moran.

"We cannot afford to act rashly. If He Xia sees through us and uses our plan to his advantage, then we will be in danger." Pingting said, "It isn't a fair contest yet. If He Xia takes a wrong step, he has a huge force that can restore it, but if we make the slightest error, we'll lose the entire war."

Chu Beijie agreed with Pingting's comments. He said, "I reckon we must send out spies. The spies must infiltrate and learn more about Yun Chang's inside. They need to distinguish who we can rely on and those who will never betray the Yun Chang army. These first two groups will be contacted in secret, encouraging them to revolt."

The Queen of Dong Lin understood, continuing, "The final group will be assassinated in secret, framing He Xia. The conflict between the people of Yun Chang and He Xia will escalate."

Chu Beijie laughed, "Clever insight, Sister-in-Law."

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei put it so clearly that even people who don't understand can."

Chu Beijie then said, "The words I just said are only a rough guideline, like a dry forest bathed in oil. To ignite it into a huge bonfire, we still need a small spark."

This remark mentioned a key point. Everyone listened to him, holding their breaths.

They didn't expect Chu Beijie to tilt his head and smile at Pingting. "If Advisor Bai can think of the solution to generate this spark, I will personally kiss Advisor Bai's hand ten times to show my gratitude." His heart had been itching for ages and could no longer keep it in. He just blurted the words out.

A sudden honey-sweet atmosphere flooded in the tense military conference.

The crowd felt embarrassed.

Even Moran, who knew the Duke of Zhen-Bei's personality the most, couldn't help break into a cold sweat.

Pingting's pitch black eyes widened in surprised. She had always been quiet and indifferent. Now two red clouds immediately climbed onto her face, thanks to Chu Beijie's direct address in front of these generals. She rolled her eyes lightly, already forming a good response. She smiled, "It's not that I don't have a solution, but please change the reward, Duke. If Pingting is correct, Duke mustn't touch Pingting's hand for ten days."

Without waiting for Chu Beijie's response, she slowly said, "There are two tangible measures to destroy the enemy's army. Of course one is to directly fight each other until one is beaten so that after the battle, the enemy would collapse whenever hearing the Duke's name. We have to try and narrow the gap between the two troops before having the final confrontation. However this method cannot be used at the moment."

Chu Beijie waved it away. He eloquently asked, "And then the second?"

"The second, of course, is to stop the enemy's food supply. How could there not be chaos if the soldiers are hungry?"

Moran said, "That's another thing that's easier said than done. He Xia is deeply aware of the art of war and deeply understood the importance of food resources. How could it possibly be so easy to stop his food supply for several tens of thousands of soldiers?"

Pingting's pupils flickered as she exchanged a playful glance with Chu Beijie. She softly asked, "If Pingting answers incorrectly, how will Duke fine her?"

Chu Beijie frowned as he murmured, "You selfishly changed it to such an annoying bet, so I don't want to bet with you anymore. I'll think of a plan myself."

"A bit too late, the stakes are set." Pingting beamed before looking back at the crowd. "The only way to stop He Xia's food supply is to take the risk and capture Yun Chang's central forage."

Ruohan was utterly shocked. "The forage must always be in the very centre, so it is undoubtedly deep with Yun Chang territory. If our army infiltrates there and gets caught..."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Pingting's small smile was wise and particularly calm, radiating in every direction. "Not only do we have to get inside Yun Chang, we have to get in without leaving a trace, raising any sort of alarm like a ghost. The Yun Chang army will promptly surround us if we make the slightest mistake. We would die without proper burial."

"This..." Sen Rong gasped, "How is this possible?"

He wasn't afraid of death, but he definitely would never rashly agreed to die.

The Queen of Dong Lin slowly said, "Even the long-missing Duke of Zhen-Bei's return to the mortal world has happened, what else is impossible? Please continue, Miss Bai. I do wonder if Miss Bai has already concluded which is the city must be captured."

Moran said, "The forage for the Yun Chang army is an important fortress in Zuxi. However, it's the most important one in Yun Chang, and we don't know how many Yun Chang soldiers are guarding it. Even if we desperately manage to make it there, there is no way He Xia wouldn't notice us."

“When did I say to make it to Zuxi?” Pingting shook her head, the bright light of wisdom shining in her eyes. “Although the fortress is important, aren’t the checkpoint cities on the way to Zuxi equally important?”

At this remark, everyone’s eyes shone.

Sen Rong suddenly slapped his knee hard. “True! Haha, that’s very true! We won’t be able to slip into the heavily guarded Zuxi, so we’ll just focus on when the resources are still on the way.”

Luoshang also appeared to be excited. After standing up, he immediately bowed to Pingting, his face quite solemn as he pleaded, “Please, Miss Bai, don’t keep us hanging and freely solve the mystery. Where on earth is such a city in Yun Chang? My sword hand is really beginning to itch.”

Pingting received the bow and seemed to be a bit embarrassed. She quickly solved the mystery with two words, “Qierou.”

“Qierou?”

Pingting slowly turned back, seeing the happiness in Chu Beijie’s eyes. She softly asked, “Pingting has already solved the mystery. Who won?”

Chu Beijie pretended to be helpless, sighing painfully. “You won.”

Everyone had strained their ears, waiting for his reply. They couldn’t help laugh. The heavy, oppressive atmosphere due to the bad situation was instantly swept away. Even the Queen of Dong Lin couldn’t hold back her chuckles which she held behind her long sleeve.

“Good, then let’s get to the details. Firstly, how do we get the army inside Yun Chang so the enemy army won’t realise we’re trying to capture Qierou.” After laughing, Chu Beijie stood up, the sharpness returning to his eyes. He took out a scroll of cloth from his sleeves and spread it on the table. “Come see.”

The people all came closer, inspecting the detailed yet tidily-drawn army map.

“This is the map that I finished compiling last night after receiving several army reports from my spies. This place here is our target of capture, Qierou City.”

In Yun Chang...

The inside of Qierou City was beautiful except the City Governor’s mood was quite bad.

“Came back again?” Fanlu repeatedly fiddled with his light crossbow in his hands, asking rather lazily.

“Yes.”

“Didn’t he leave the city yesterday?”

“Governor Bing and Sir Bei Zhi An said they invited Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng outside the city yesterday, treating them to a good meal. But for some reason, the two Sirs changed into peasant clothing and entered the city again. The two played around in the restaurant’s brothel, saying they were trying to understand public opinion. They said they were here to check Governor’s performance and wouldn’t leave a day earlier if they hadn’t examined it properly.”

“Public opinion my ass!” Fanlu had been enduring for many days and could no longer suppress his fury. He set his crossbow on the table with a thud, causing the cups to jump a couple of times into the air. While at it, they tipped on their sides, causing the water to splosh over the edges until the table was covered in tea. “Those two little cheaters blackmailed the officials against Yun Chang to earn his favour. How dare they come to blackmail me!”

“Gov...Governor...” The clerk behind him, Dujing, stroked his goatee as he came beside Fanlu’s ear. He urged, “Sir, choose your words carefully. The air in Yun Chang is somewhat jittery, and the Prince Consort has been sending people around to look for those who disrespect him. If Sirs Pu Guang, Pu Sheng or other henchmen of the Prince Consort were to hear those words, then...”

Fanlu harrumphed coldly.

There was no way Fanlu didn’t know of He Xia’s rapid and barbaric methods.

He was a general promoted by Gui Changqing and therefore counted as someone on Gui Changqing’s side. He Xia hated the Gui family to the guts, so naturally he didn’t have a good impression of him.

Currently He Xia was outside, plotting to take down Gui Le. Inside, he had to deal with the important officials and generals who held the real power. He didn’t have time to care about the unimportant governor of Qierou City.

But what about the future?

What if He Xia really did establish a new country, ascend to the throne as the king, completing all of the other physically-depleting tasks? Would he personally come to clean up the rest of the unimportant soldiers and generals?

Needless to say, the future looked bleak. Even now, those cheaters who joined up with He Xia were putting their homes up at stake.

“What else do they do in Qierou City, apart from indulging themselves in drink and other pleasures?” Fanlu shook off the angry expression, revealing an absentminded sarcastic smile.

His subordinate saw he was no longer furious before daring to continue the report. “The two generals have been indulging themselves. As they don’t pay the bill, the boss of the restaurants are asking Governor for the money.”

“Pay for them.”

“Then...Chunyan House’s Old Yang, she came too...”

“Pay for them too.”

“And...”

“You don’t need to say any more, pay for all of them. Serve them properly and let them do what they want.”

After sending away his subordinates to deal with that Pu Guang and Pu Sheng, he still had to deal with the various matters of Qierou City. Fanlu’s heart was anxious. After approving a few documents, he could no longer sit still any more. He summoned for his clerk, Dujing, saying, “This stuff is a mess. Pick out the important ones, write a approximate summary, and hand it to me later.” He then stepped out of his office.

Once he reached the courtyard, he habitually turned right, inadvertently stroding until he reached the door to a very familiar place.

Zuiju happened to be holding a pile of clothes as she headed outside, bumping into Fanlu. She jumped back in shock, her eyes flickering up. She stared at him, “Why’re you being a door god? You’re standing there like a rock, not letting me pass.”

Ever since Dong Lin was invaded by Yun Chang, there had been no news of the people Zuiju knew. Since she had nowhere to go, Fanlu retrieved the lock on her door so she could freely roam around in the residence.

“You mended my clothes?” Fanlu’s gaze fell on her hands.

At this question, Zuiju’s cheeks reddened slightly. She immediately stuffed the clothes into his arms, biting her lip as she said, “Who would spend the effort to mend your clothes. It’s not like I’m a servant you bought.”

“Then why did you take my clothes?”

“I...” Hearing his cold interrogation, the fire in Zuiju’s heart couldn’t help flare up. She grinded her teeth, “I reckon your clothes are dirty because you’re far too annoying. You obviously know that some laundry maid in your residence sucks at washing, yet don’t bother getting another. You’re a dignified governor, yet you don’t even have common sense. Let me tell you this straight off, I’ll never re-wash your clothes again.”

“Oh...understood.” Fanlu liked to see her blushing the most. He lowered his head until he was close to her ear. “You reckon that I don’t smell nice when I hold you? But truthfully, it’s the clothes that don’t smell nice. I am very, very clean and smell nice.”

Zuiju had her heart racing with these soft frivolous words. She clutched to her chest as she took a step back, stomping. “You damn hateful man. How could you say such a thing when I kindly washed your clothes for you? You always bully me.”

Fanlu squinted at her widened eyes. “You’re the hateful woman, getting more and more spoiled. You know I’m not afraid of anything, just your spoiledness. How could I, a dignified governor, always be bullied by you?”

Zuiju was stunned by his shamelessness in stealing phrases for a while. “You...you, you...” She bit her lip, wiping her eyes as she rushed into the room.

Fanlu raised his voice, “Don’t cry, don’t cry. Fine, I’ll take it back. You’re not hateful and I’ll bully you the way you want me to. If that’s not good enough, I won’t fight back.” He said this as he chased her inside, holding onto the huge pile of clothes.

He was rather eccentric. He deliberately tried to provoke Zuiju and then went out of his way to cheer her up again.

Zuiju wasn’t that easily cheered up, however. She turned her back on him, fuming, “I don’t want to see you. I’m going to pack up my bags and go see my Teacher.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Who wants you to?”

The corners of Fanlu’s lips lifted to a smirk. “Fine, you don’t let me accompany you, so I’ll go accompany some other woman.”

Zuiju abruptly turned around. “You’re so annoying! If you want to go, then go. Don’t bother me.”

While the two seethed, Fanlu’s subordinate hurried inside. He reported, “Sir, Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng have arrived at the residence entrance.”

Fanlu knew the two men were satisfied with their indulgences and came back to make trouble again. His eyebrows furrowed slightly, and his voice became serious. “Understood. You first go prepare the guest room and attend to them properly. Find a few pretty ladies to accompany them while they drink. Just don’t let them bother me.”

The subordinate noted down the instructions and left.

Zuiju curiously asked, “You ought to see those eyebrows of yours. Who dares to make Governor so upset?”

“Two very annoying bed bugs.” Fanlu didn’t want to say any more, so he returned to his slovenly look. “Just ignore those annoying bed bugs. We haven’t finished yet.”

“What ‘we’? You’re you and I’m me.”

“Sigh, I surrender.” Fanlu came in a bit closer, lowering his voice. “I have a secret to tell you, which could be regarded as a sin. Want to listen?”

“What secret?”

“That laundry maid who cleans poorly was specially arranged by me. I knew that someone would stupidly fall for it and re-wash my clothes again...ow, don’t hit, don’t hit me. I told you not to hit me. Why are you still hitting me so hard? Oi, I’m going to fight back...”

After the confession, Fanlu spent ages trying to cheer Zuiju up until she was willing to listen. Most of the tension in Fanlu’s heart had dispersed. He looked up at the sky, only to realise that he unwittingly wasted half the day. He stood up and stretched, “I’d better stop playing with you and go do paperwork. The peasants of Qierou’s peaceful daily lives all depends on me.”

Zuiju narrowed her eyes at him, “What a bragger. Hurry up and go then.”

“I’ll come here in the evening for dinner.”

“I refuse.”

Seeing that she had dropped her guard, Fanlu lightly pinched her on the cheek. “Then you come to my place for dinner.”

By the time Zuiju fumed up again, Fanlu strode off far away.

### Translation Notes:

- “A housewife cannot cook a meal without rice” (ch63): You can’t do anything without having the right resources. At first I wanted to translated this as, “You can’t make bricks without straw”, which is a more common English saying, but the literal translation makes sense as well.
- “Cold Palace” (ch57): When the women in the royal harem are no longer “active”. This may suggest that they aren’t loved (detested even) or aren’t fertile. It’s better than execution...however, you drag your family down (most of the harem are daughters of wealthy/noble families). There wouldn’t be much medical treatment, quality food, or fine clothes they are used to. Many die without funerals or get driven crazy by lack of love.
- “Changxiao” (ch56): Literally means “long laugh”.
- “Dwindling blossoms and off falls foliage, the drizzles of hurt autumn.” (ch60): I believe this is an allusion to “Ba Sheng Gan Zhou”, which is a poem so this sentence doesn’t make much sense in prose. My interpretation of this poem is mainly about homesickness, but the poet stays in his current location because it’s tied to a woman he longs for but can’t have.
- “Green screens” (ch56): Has been implied before by “blinds” but never quite explained. Often important people and women, especially unmarried women, can hide behind a screen or blind to talk with others. It’s for social modesty.
- “Persimmons...softest” (ch57): You can substitute the “softest persimmon” to “weakest opponent”. Although likely to be unintentional by the author, it is interesting to note that soft persimmons are really sweet. Victory is considered sweet so this implies that war is about the sweetest victory. Attacking Bei Mo supposedly leads to a rewarding victory, because they are a better country yet they fall without too much sacrifice from Yun Chang.
- “Two fingers” (ch61): A gesture for a very formal oath. Imagine the peace sign, but the two fingers are touching. When swearing to God, heavens etc, your palm is away from you and the upright fingers point straight up to the sky.
- “Wrapped up rice parcel” (ch56): A more literal translation is “wrapped up zongzi”. Zongzi are a special type of rice dumplings that are traditionally eaten during the Duanwu Festival. Even though this paragraph’s content is quite brutal, it’s quite funny in itself hence it has been translated as “rice parcel” to try and convey this humour.

# Book Seven

## *"The Magnificence of Country"*

### Chapter 65

Dong Lin, inside a hidden valley.

Chu Beijie and Pingting's alliance brought up the fallen morale. After the military conference ended, each of the generals seemed to have a new goal as they stepped out of the tent. It seemed like their footsteps had become much lighter.

But at the same time, everyone understood they were taking a huge risk too. The Duke of Zhen-Bei and Pingting's strategies were both bold and dangerous. There wasn't any room for the slightest error.

After the discussion ended, Chu Beijie pulled Pingting from the crowd heading outside the tent. "How could Advisor Bai not stay by after exhibiting such talent to me, the Main Advisor, just now?"

Pingting turned and smiled, "Duke, don't forget our bet. Pingting won, so Duke isn't allowed to touch Pingting's hand for ten days."

Chu Beijie's eyes suddenly flashed, not hesitating to draw the Divine Spirit sword from his waist. He handed it to Pingting, "Pingting might as well cut me ten times, replacing the promised ten days."

Pingting was taken aback by the sword's reflection. She hurriedly put the sword back in its scabbard, frowning, "Duke's desperate measure isn't going to work. You were the one who provoked Pingting first, having a map of Qierou already hidden. Your intent to test me is quite obvious. What if Pingting hadn't been able to answer, utterly shaming herself?"

Chu Beijie lowered his voice, "It's not a desperate measure. Not being able to touch your hand for ten days, especially when you're right in front of me, is more painful than ten sword cuts. Longing is bitter, a pain that comes from the inside. I would rather take the easy route, fairly and justly." His handsome face was earnest.

Pingting's heart trembled at his words. She lowered her head. It was ages before she said in a barely audible volume, "Even if the promise of ten days is dissolved, Duke shouldn't touch Pingting's hand every day at every possible moment." She thought for a moment, unable to hide her angry flush. She scowled, "Duke is far too aggressive, forcing Pingting to make that bet. No, Pingting must pay back this hatred." Her energetic eyes lifted slightly, looking both sweetly and angrily as she glared at him.

Chu Beijie saw this as a gentle charming expression. His mouth lifted into a smile as he whispered, "Tell me where you're going."

At this question, Pingting's face dimmed slightly. She softly said, "I should go see genius Doctor Huo. Zuiju..." She softly sighed, her eyes already red.



Chu Beijie's heart suddenly burst in pain.

After the two's reunion, Pingting seemed to have a bitter recollection of the past, mentioning it occasionally. Every time she did, she only mentioned a few words at a time, unwilling to describe in detail.

Yet he deeply understood the damage of the ups and downs had not yet healed. Zuiju's death added another blow to Pingting.

That year, what on earth happened on the icy snowcapped Songsen Mountains that caused this kind of tragedy?

Was their child also buried under that mass of white snow?

But he didn't dare ask Pingting whether their poor child actually died or not. To Pingting, that must be unbearable pain.

"I'll come with you." Chu Beijie tightly held onto Pingting's hand.

Pingting slowly shook her head, "Forgive me, Duke. Pingting would like to talk alone to Zuiju's Teacher."

"Pingting..."

"If from now on...Pingting really needs something," Pingting raised her head, her eyelashes rising unsteadily as she looked at Chu Beijie, "Duke will definitely be by Pingting's side, right?"

Chu Beijie was jolted defenceless by her delicately pitiful gaze. His heroic courage seemed to drain out as he solemnly promised, "Definitely."

Pingting smiled. She gently pulled out the little finger from inside Chu Beijie's palm, hooking it around her own. She then turned to leave.

Chu Beijie stood and watched her leave the tent. As his mood fell, he suddenly felt the peculiar feeling of being watched.

He was no ordinary person. When he knew someone was watching, his alertness suddenly returned his heart. He turned around and began to chuckle. He spread his arms open while helplessly saying, "If Sister-in-Law wants to laugh, go ahead. As the saying goes, there is always one thing to conquer another. I can never do anything when in front of Bai Pingting."

The various generals in the tent had already left, but the Queen remained behind, propped up on a chair. There was laughter in her smile, "Duke of Zhen-Bei is too modest. That desperate measure struck me as quite a good choice. How could you say you can't do anything? Gentleness has always been the grave of heroes, so perhaps the beloved women who resist their men will all be like Duke of Zhen-Bei." Her gaze slowly drifted to somewhere beyond the tent door. It seemed to mix in the wind in the sky, instantly flying across thousands of miles, reaching to the far away Dong Lin Royal Residence's location with its former striking and luxurious designs.

She thought of the top-notch alcohol, food, and the central hall decorated in gold. It seemed all like an illusion now.

She accompanied the King for many years but only deeply realised what she felt during the very last occasion where they parted.

She wasn't only the Queen of Dong Lin but also the wife of this man.

After the last of the Dong Lin Royal House disappeared before her eyes, she realised what made her remember, the feelings between him and her.

Dong Lin was not relevant, the Royal House was not relevant, nor was the King and Queen.

Only husband and wife, him and her.

For those virtuous customs, she had often uncontrollably wanted to clench onto his hand and embrace him, yet she had thought of her rank as the Queen. She held back on her desire to indulge in his love.

“Sister-in-Law?”

“Eh?” The Queen mumbled, suddenly coming back to her sense. She called, “Duke of Zhen-Bei, please come to my side.”

Chu Beijie took two steps, sitting down beside her.

“Are you planning to classify Dong Lin’s soldiers as a part of the Ting Army?” The Queen of Dong Lin asked.

Chu Beijie originally intended to make this clear with his sister-in-law. He frankly nodded, saying, “Yes.”

“Ting Army...” The Queen of Dong Lin held the words, as if chewing it in her mouth. She smiled bitterly, “That day, the King once said the Duke of Zhen-Bei is too sincere for a man and wasn’t quite suited to live in a heartless Royal House. He was worried about that the most, but now, I don’t quite know whether to worry or rejoice over Duke of Zhen-Bei’s current disposition. After all, without the immense love for Bai Pingting, how could Duke of Zhen-Bei magically conjure the Ting army, willing to oppose He Xia?” She then changed the subject, asking, “I want to confirm this matter. Suppose Dong Lin’s soldiers assimilate into the Ting army... If the Ting army was to win in the future, Duke of Zhen-Bei will have great power but what will Dong Lin’s fate be? What about the Dong Lin Royal House?”

Chu Beijie was silent for a moment. He clenched his teeth, “To be honest, Sister-in-Law, I will create a new country, with a new name.”

“Then Dong Lin...”

“Dong Lin is already a thing of the past. I’m not doing this for Dong Lin but to give Pingting a peaceful world to live in. If Dong Lin gained all the glory after this mess settled, then that officially means Dong Lin conquered the other three countries. What difference is that to He Xia? The other three countries would secretly hold anger in their heart, waiting for the right time to attack. There’ll never be true peace in the world.” Chu Beijie’s eyes were determined as he solemnly added, “This is my promise to Pingting, and it will never be changed.”

The Queen of Dong Lin’s gaze suddenly turned sharp, studying Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie didn’t avoid her gaze in the slightest. He faintly added, “If Sister-in-law is angry, feel free to punish Chu Beijie but my decision has been set.”

The Queen of Dong Lin studied him carefully for a long time until her sharp expression gradually faded. She helplessly side, “The fundamental roots of a country has always been its people, correct?”

“Sister-in-Law?” Chu Beijie felt stunned.

“Where can you possibly find a wall that doesn’t let wind pass through at all? The conversation between Princess Yaotian and the Duke of Zhen-Bei before the war at Yun Chang has been inquired by many people.” The Queen of Dong Lin wrily smiled, revealing a look of recollection. “When the Royal Residence was burned, I couldn’t help but

often wonder how my Dong Lin looked like, when it was first established. Perhaps there was a union of some sort, one whose people didn't hesitate to shed blood so they could look forward to seeing his wife and children, happily living through their daily lives, right?"

Why is, after hundreds of years, a country engraved in the heart yet its people were forgotten?

Hundreds and tens of thousands of people, hundreds and tens of thousands of deaths, had all been tangled up in it.

The Queen of Dong Lin's slow gaze swept past Chu Beijie's face. She sighed, suddenly making her decision. "While country is important, what good is it to think lives are worthless? Without peasants living out their lives in peace, country means death. Duke of Zhen-Bei, just go do what you want."

Chu Beijie hadn't expected the Queen would make her choice so decisively. He fiercely stood up and knelt on one knee. He articulated, "I will forever remember Sister-in-Law's grace." He hadn't expected the most difficult hurdle to be broken through so easily.

"Go. Settle the chaos, so that life is no longer trampled on, returning peace to this world." The Queen of Dong Lin's lips raised into a faint smile, a trace of longing escaping into it. "Peasant or royalty, everyone wants the same. As people who have the privilege of being born human, we should all know our lives are precious and should know we shouldn't be trampled on by others like ants."

The Duke of Zhen-Bei would establish a vast new empire.

This empire's vastness wouldn't come from its troops. Every single person in the country would know how to respect themselves, not look down upon themselves.

They would not see each other as puppets nor tools for others.

They would never be forced to walk on a battlefield.

When the threat of war loomed, they could choose whether they wanted to fight to protect their future, like today's Ting army.

And if their red blood fell onto the battlefield, that patch of earth seeped in blood would grow the lushest green grass for the future.

"Bai Pingting," The Queen of Dong Lin raised her head, sighing at the skies. "An amazing Bai Pingting."

Gui Le, twilight rustled.

There was no longer the soft fragrance, that both bees and butterflies enjoyed, for the people in the Cold Palace.

The lock untouched for so long began to softly clink. The Queen of Gui Le, wearing tattered clothing, slowly lifted her head. She saw a majestic yet familiar figure."

The King of Gui Le, He Su, stepped through the door. "Your older brother Le Zhen was defeated by Fei Zhaoxing. In fear of Yun Chang army attacking again, he led the remnants far away from the capital to escape."

His tone was calm, surprisingly not angry.

The Queen of Dong Lin was imprisoned for many days, so this was the first time she heard the news of her brother. She was silent for a moment before coldly asking "Is King here to bestow death on me?"

He Su didn't make a sound for a long time. He walked towards his wife and extended his index finger and then as if from the time he was still affectionate. He began to stroke her thinned chin.

"Queen, do you not want to see Shao'er?" He Su suddenly asked.

The Queen of Gui Le shook at this, looking at He Su in disbelief. "King...will let me see Shao'er?" Her son was her heart, after all. Her voice trailed off.

"Why wouldn't I let you?" He Su sighed, answering with another question.

The Queen knew she would die, most likely poisoning by dagger or alcohol. She made her decision to accept that. But she hadn't expected He Su to come personally. His words and actions were so different from her imagination. Her heart couldn't help soften, as they have been married for so many years, in addition to mentioning their son. Her face could never muster the coldness from before so she lowered her head, faintly replying, "I secretly revealed King's ambush, my father monopolised power, and my brother defied the royal Order, using the army as he wished to go against King. The charges the Le family are guilty of...are all worthy of a death sentence."

"Queen also knows of her own crime?" He Su thought of the current situation of Gui Le and couldn't help coldly harrumph. When seeing the Queen's head lowered in silence, he sighed softly again. "Get up, Queen. I'll forgive your sins. You are ordered to return to the Royal Residence, as the master of the harem."

"What?" The Queen raised her head in surprise.

Le Zhen leading the troops against the capital was no different from rebellion. This was the most treacherous crime against royalty, one that could never be forgiven.

But He Su's expression didn't seem to have the slightest trace of a joke.

The Cold Palace was particularly dark at night. He Su's figure stood in front of the door, so very close, yet she could not see the slightest bit in the depths of his eyes. It felt like he was far away, only leaving a mass of blurry shadow.

The Queen thought how her relationship with her husband was already broken down to an irreparable state. She lowered her head again, grinding her teeth, "King should still kill me. I was married the Royal House when I was fifteen. When King ascended to the throne, I was immediately crowned as Queen. Thinking of our love from back then, I can't imagine how we have ended up like this today. It's all become a done deal, irreversible, so even if King forgives me, I would never have the face to be Queen once more. I really do regret it, the jealousy I had to get someone to warn He Xia of the ambush for a mere Bai Pingting. Even if she was taken into the harem, what did it matter as long as King was happy? For a single woman, Gui Le has become a mess, I...I really was stupid..."

Her shoulder began to dramatically tremble as she collapsed onto the ground, weeping.

As the Queen, she had been raised and ever lived in the residence. He Su was really the only man she held in her heart. In the past, they dined the best cuisine together, surrounded by servants, discussed various matters every day—including her father and brother. But the Queen just had to scheme below the surface, deliberately fulfilling her own selfish desires.

From the moment her red clothes faded and her hands becoming too lazy to comb her black hair, she listlessly stared at passing clouds in the Cold Palace. She would occasionally remember the past, often the most trivial of things.

She'd remember how she gingerly stepped into the Prince's Residence for the first time, how she saw He Xia for the first time as he slowly lifting red veil on their wedding night. She remembered how excited she had been as she

lovingly murmured into He Xia's ear about her belly having his flesh and blood. She too remembered how she dressed up to receive the Queen's seal in front of many witnesses.

How did this couple step towards such national hate? Why had the string of fate, which they should have already tied for life, constantly tangle or be cut by the slightest heartache and ultimately leave nothing behind?

The Queen wept so much that it felt like her insides were breaking. She felt a gentle touch on her shoulder from two large palms.

The Queen lifted up her tear-stained face, as He Su held her up.

"Don't cry any more, Queen. I'll be honest, Le Zhen secretly fled with the army, leaving the capital empty. He Xia has already led the army of Yun Chang here, completely besieging us."

The Queen was taken aback, "What?" She had been imprisoned for a long time. No one dared to pass on the outside news, so she had no idea the situation worsened.

"One's strength is meaningless when knowing defeat is certain; I'd rather not fight this battle. Tomorrow at this time, I will open the gates, personally delivering a letter of surrender to He Xia." He Su smiled bitterly, "The country's capital is almost gone, so why shouldn't I forgive the betrayal crimes of the Queen and the Elder Statesmen?"

The Queen could hear her husband's words were full of deprivation and helplessness. His attitude was very different from his former chilly pride, causing her heart to ache and regret. Her voice quivered, "If it weren't for my mistake, Gui Le wouldn't've had civil strife and King would have had the army. How could He Xia possibly come so easily? I..."

"Don't say any more." He Su cut off her words as he lowered his words. "The maids are holding onto your clothes and ornaments. They are waiting outside the door. Queen should properly dress up like she used to. It's been a long time since you've accompanied me while I drink alcohol. Tonight will be ours, not to be disturbed by outsiders."

The Queen quietly studied He Xia before finally bowing. "Yes."

He Su turned to leave. There indeed were maids waiting outside. Once the King left, they swam in like fish. Each held a tray. On them were the Queen's favourite clothes and accessories, even rouge and powders, complete with coloured incense.

"Queen." The crowd of maids obediently kowtowed upon seeing the long-lost Queen's appearance. Each face seemed dark with sadness. The news of the King's surrender to He Xia had spread through the Royal Residence.

After she bathed and dressed, the Queen carefully drew her eyebrows. She made sure she was dressed like a goddess before heading for the King's chamber.

He Su had indeed ordered his men to prepare food and alcohol. He was on the other side of the bead curtain, drinking as he watched the scenery under the moon.

The scenery was beautiful, the dishes were warm, and the alcohol was warm. Thinking how she was still imprisoned in the Cold Palace a moment ago, this seemed like a dream. She could only sigh at life's unpredictability.

The two people had infinite thoughts in their minds as they quietly sat, drinking a few cups. He Su asked, "Why isn't Queen saying anything?"

"I..." The Queen's face, which she had drawn on very finely, was rather confused. "I don't know what to say."

He Su carefully assessed his wife's face. He broke into laughter, "I just suddenly thought that ever since becoming the master of the harem, you are the most beautiful today."

At such praise, the Queen's heavy heart floated lightly for a few moments, as if her body had a lot more hazy white mist. She bowed slightly, "One can only see the most clearly when their heart is without distractions. Maybe it's because today I will never have to pretend or have anything to hide from King."

"Well said." He Su raised his cup, "Today's Queen makes me remember the Queen that first entered the Prince Residence. Time sure flies; we've been husband and wife for so many years already." His tone was inadvertently gentle as all those years ago.

The Queen's face revealed a touched surprise. "King...you still remember how I looked when first entering the Prince Residence?"

"How could I forget?"

"Really..." The Queen raised a hand to touch her hair. She softly asked, "To be honest, I remember it too."

The Prince Residence, the Prince He Su of that time.

There was joyous music, humorous jokes, and delightful qin sound.

A group of young friends at first, prominent families of Gui Le. They gathered, practicing swordsmanship, playing qin, or discussing literature, art, or politics. The ones who clapped would clap and the ones who joked would joke. Yangfeng had always been in the Prince Residence, while He Xia and Pingting had become regulars.

The Le family had strict policies. She was the Crown Princess hence her identity was different from the others. She couldn't laugh and mess around with the others, only lean against the heavy wall and listen to the faint sounds of laughter that came through.

Once.

The King remembered everything from back then.

But did the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, He Xia, the leader of the army currently surrounding the capital, remembered too?

## Chapter 66

The scarlet sun rose from the east of the capital.

The light replaced the gentleness of the moon, the dominating dawn. As if mocking everyone's heavy hearts, it casted its light on the people, the capital of Yun Chang, as well as the raised flags of Yun Chang fluttering in the wind.

Under siege.

After today, the glamorous dances and sophistication of the famous Gui Le would cease to exist.

Under the shining blades of the Yun Chang army, the heavy city gates began to open inch by inch.

The King of Gui Le, He Su, brought along the Queen and other important officials of Gui Le behind him. The crown had been removed and shoes taken off, as they walked out of the gates. They were stopped from going any further, afraid of the soldiers' long spears on the two sides of the road. The kneeling figures with tears in their eyes, struggling to restrain themselves from weeping, were the numerous peasants of Gui Le.

The country had been destroyed.

Everything was over.

The Jing-An Ducal Residence was gone in flames overnight, rapidly spreading the news of the deeply respected Marquess of Jing-An rebelling and being driven out of the country. Today, the Marquess of Jing-An returned, but their country had ended instead.

On the plains outside the Yun Chang capital, He Su stood before the Yun Chang army. He abandoned his supreme identity, kneeling before his enemy.

“He Su is a sinner, incompetently leading Gui Le, resulting in the peasants' hardship. Since ancient times, treasures are only given to those with power, so He Su is willing to give the Great Seal of Gui Le to Prince Consort of Yun Chang, to represent surrender.”

His tone was solemn, every word squeezed out from the back of his throat. He Su held the Great Seal with both hands, slowly raising it as he passed it over.

A country heirloom, more important than thousands of gold.

He Su knelt as he lifted the Great Seal above his head, his arms slightly trembling.

He never once thought the huge Gui Le would be ruined in his hands.

During the last moments of his dying father, he secretly urged, “You have to be extremely careful when it comes to anything regarding the House of Jing-An.”

Indeed he had been careful, plotting immediately after ascending to the throne. He carefully arranged every movement, device, assembly set, and the ruthless burning of the Jing-An Ducal Residence to the last blade of grass. He pursued them hard, eventually killing the Duke of Jing-An and the Duchess of Jing-An, only leaving a He Xia behind.

Quite ironically, today, he finally realised the depths of what “extremely careful” meant.

The Queen and the thousand generals were pale, each looking as if their souls were lost, as they knelt behind He Su.

The Yun Chang army was neat and quiet, as their weapon blades gleamed harshly.

He Xia's expression seemed refreshed, in high spirits. He held the reins in one hand as his gaze slowly looked down, glancing the Great Seal quite unexcitedly. The corners of his lips rose, “Put it away.”

One of his trusted soldiers answered, “Yes.” He got off the horse and came over.

He Su could only feel the weight in his hand lighten, realising the Great Seal was already placed in someone else's hand. He felt Gui Le now truly belonged to someone else. The energy in his limbs vanished, almost causing him to collapse onto the ground.

Now that the country had fallen, how could he go see his ancestors?

But no matter how upset he was at that moment, he couldn't not care about the overall situation, the life and death of the people behind him. In front of He Xia, he could only reluctantly bow, bearing the pain. "Please feel free to enter the capital, Prince Consort of Yun Chang and his troops. The Royal Residence has already been cleared, ready for Prince Consort of Yun Chang to use."

He Su felt a strange feeling on his back. He knew He Xia was sitting on the horse, watching him condescendingly.

After a long time, he heard a familiar voice above his head, slowly saying, "Back when we studied together, I remember Mister say if the monarch of a fallen country wants to express their sincerity, they will generally personally serve the victor, following every command regardless of how brutal. I wonder if King is truly sincere towards He Xia?"

Unease rippled amongst the officials of Gui Le, He Su's expression twisting.

Memories weren't enough, as this was a revenge of hatred seeped in old roots. It seemed He Xia not only wanted his life, but also wanted to humiliate him in front of other people in every possible way.

He's like a knife. I am the fish meat. My death is not enough, but...

He Su's fists tightly clenched, hidden inside his sleeves. He lowered his head and gritted his teeth, "Please allow He Su to welcome Prince Consort into the city to show sincerity."

"King..." The Queen gasped softly from behind, quietly beginning to sob.

The other elderly officials also began to cry.

"Don't say any more." He Su decided to cut off the queen, enduring the humiliation. He stood up from the ground, as if stepping on thorns, and began to step one by one towards He Xia's horse. He reached out for the bridle.

He had yet touch the bridle when something suddenly lashed out in front, lightly stopping him. It turned out to be the whip.

He Su raised his head, not understanding, thinking that it was another way to make his life difficult.

He Xia was cold again, "Although I hate you, that's all." He waved his hand, raising his voice, "Enter the city! We won't go to the Royal Residence, just to the Jing-An Ducal Residence."

"Enter the city!"

"Enter the city!"

"Enter the city..."

The words were passed on from soldier to soldier. The intonations rose and fell, resembling a never-stopping echo.

The Yun Chang army began to slowly move into the capital of Gui Le like a massive beast that just awoke from its slumber.

He Xia sat on the horse, followed by the royal flag, surrounded by his soldiers. He Su and the thousands of officials painfully trudged behind them.



Once entering the city, the unfamiliar yet familiar feeling raged towards He Xia. This ancient city was the place he grew up in, played in its alleys and rode happily on its roads.

Gui Le, Gui Le's Jing-An Ducal Residence, Gui Le's Marquess of Jing-An.

Gui Le's two qin players, Gui Le's Yangfeng, Gui Le's Bai Pingting.

How on earth did all of this happen?

No one could understand what He Xia felt.

This was the first time he'd formally went through the Gui Le capital gates after the Jing-An Ducal Residence fell.

He Xia had achieved his vow for revenge, but for some reason, he realised that this didn't quench the pain and dissatisfaction he felt about the time lost from then at all.

He had the Gui Le capital. This capital no longer had the Jing-An Ducal Residence, no longer had the smiling faces of his parents, no longer had Pingting. Only He Su remained, becoming his enemy for life.

He had avenged and won a country, yet who did he have to tell this piece of great news?

Even Yaotian was no longer here.

The sound of hooves sounded once more, carrying to his former home. When he stopped, it seemed the flowers were crying and birds were startled. Only a pile of rubble remained of the demolished building.

"After the Jing-An Ducal Residence was destroyed by fire, it was abandoned."

He Xia dismounted, gazing at the moss-covered entrance for a long time. Finally, he stepped forwards, slowly climbing up the familiar stairs, stepping over his home's threshold.

The past was fresh in his minds. The scene was busy as guests were invited in.

His father was in the hall, commenting politics with officials, while his mother was surrounded by maids who chatted about rather interesting events and rumours in the Royal Residence. Occasionally, He Xia would hurry in from outside and his mother would stand up from the chair, asking from the other side of the curtain, "Xia'er, there are lots of people outside as it's rather busy. Be sure to go out with some guards, so that you won't take off with Pingting alone."

"Understood. I won't go outside then. Prince He Su has sent messengers, saying the Prince Residence has a Mister who will talk about the art of war. We should go."

"Since it's like that, you can go. Don't ride your horse in the city as it won't be funny if you fall. It's better to sit in the carriage."

"Understood, Mother."

"Also, if the art of war goes on for too long, and you have to eat at the Prince Residence, remember to come back...sigh...that child..."

She had yet to finish instructing. He Xia already excitedly rushed out the door. He looked for Pingting, not caring about what she was busy with, grabbed her hand, and ran. They'd bolt towards the horses at the gate, bringing down the whip until there was no longer any trace of them.

The memories seemed to be trapped by weeds in this place, both near and far. Every corner seemed to hold countless memories, lingering, unable to be rid of.

To forget, was something incredibly hard.

He Xia stopped in the courtyard, his handsome face as cold as ice. He ordered, "Prepare a banquet here, so that I can have a good drink in this Jing-An Ducal Residence."

He now held monstrous power, no one could neglect his smallest command.

The weeds were removed, the fallen leaves were swept. The mud-covered tiles gradually exposed their former gleam, while a mantle was placed above every door.

Red silk, green satin sheets were laid out while differently coloured mantles were round up around the abandoned pillars. They fluttered in the breeze, dancing brilliantly in the courtyard.

The residue of the fallen houses were cleared; new tables and chairs were set. Tea was served, topped with all sorts of fresh fruit.

The scarlet sun set, and the huge Jing-An Ducal Residence had been laid out. A whole day's worth of effort.

During sunset, the Jing-An Ducal Residence's rare antiques were brought out. Only a half of them were left behind after the fire, and it was strangely quite sentimental.

Drinks and dishes were served. He Xia sat in the courtyard, ordering his men to move a hundred feet back, guarding him from a distance.

The Queen of Gui Le was in charge of the jug. She quietly sat at one side, frowning but calm.

Only He Su was able to drink with him.

"Cheers." He Xia lifted his cup, clinking it in midair.

He Su was full of thoughts, but at this stage, he no longer had anything to tie him down. He wasn't afraid of death nor a cup of wine.

He too lifted the cup. "Cheers." He raised his head and drank, the acrid taste heading straight down his throat.

The wine brought in sadness, making him even more unhappy.

He Su looked around, at the splendid arrangements, concealing the ruins of the Jing-An Ducal Residence. The root of everything was him. He Su couldn't help but heave a sigh, "I didn't think we would still be able to drink together."

The Queen trudged forwards, quietly filling their cups.

"You never know, do you?" He Xia unexpectedly smiled, asking He Su, "Do you not know why I invited you to drink?"

"No."

The two had known each other for a long time. In their youth, they could be said to be childhood friends. Neither expected today. Their sharp gazes hit each other.

He Xia held the cup up. In a deep voice he said, "I want to thank you."

"Thank me?"

He Xia's handsome features seemed to be shrouded in a thin layer of smoke, not allowing anyone to see the depths of the bitterness in his eyes. "Who else am I to thank, apart from you, for the reason why I am so majestic today?"

He never thought this day would come.

He used to be the suave, romantic, happy and respected Marquess of Jing-An amongst the four countries.

He had a country to protect, a home to return to, had his parents, Pingting and Dongzhuo to be around with, received the adoration of millions of soldiers. He was prepared to shed blood to fight for his beloved Gui Le.

But everything quickly changed, without any time to breathe. He Xia would never forget the moment he watched the sky burn with the flames in the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

The Queen of Gui Le quietly sat at one side. She could see the boundless hatred under He Xia's calm expression. A shiver ran up her spine.

He Su smiled instead. He lowered his voice, "Are you hating me for getting rid of the Jing-An Ducal Residence? That's right, you grew up with me and I respected the Duke of Jing-An as my elder. That day, to protect the royal authority, I was too cruel."

He Xia said, "No need to explain, I understand."

"You do?"

"That's right, I do." He Xia raised his head, drinking another cup.

Bitter alcohol. Each cup following the next all held bitter alcohol.

He Su ruined the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Yet he, the honourable and respected Marquess of Jing-An, used poison to murder in Bei Mo, killing his favourite maid Pingting and the Royal Residence of Yun Chang. He cried while listening to Yaotian, his pregnant wife, die.

How could he not understand?

The sky was darkening from the sunset, leaving a faint glow in the clearing.

He Xia raised his cup, cheering the people who ruined his House of Jing-An. Each cup was bitter.

The rubble from the demolished building around him made his heart ache until it was crazed. It was all thanks to these people, yet he was in this sacred place, drinking next to them.

Because, he couldn't find anyone who could share this bitter alcohol, share this deserted Jing-An Ducal Residence with.

Who else?

Where were his parents? Where was Pingting?

And where was his wife who granted his military power, Yaotian?

Time wasn't kind enough to stop, passing by with a sigh. The dusk fell, quietly closing in. The guards remained utterly silent as candles were lit around them.

The two drank in silence, the Queen continuing to serve the wine.

He Su never looked at the Queen. He simply lifted his cup to drink without expression. When he lifted his head to look at the sky, the moon had already passed the transit.

He hardened his heart, putting down his empty cup on the table. He generously said, "Time's up. Go on, whether it's poison or knife. I promise you, I'm willing to commit suicide as long as my wife and son will be safe."

There was a clang as the silver jug fell onto the tiles, spilling alcohol everywhere.

The Queen of Gui Le froze on the spot, suddenly wailing. "King! King you...you..." She fell before He Su's feet, biting her purple lips but was unable to express a single word.

She knew surrendering was their only chance of escape, but she hadn't expected her husband would offer his life to He Xia to exchange for hers.

The night before, she felt they finally walked on the same path, but at this moment, her chest seemed to have been smashed by a hammer, so painful she would rather die.

He Xia looked at the Queen of Gui Le weeping at feet. A vague hint of nostalgia passed on his face, but it quickly left as soon as it came. His expression turned cold and solemn once more, "This woman seized power, causing political chaos to Gui Le. She made you lose everything, yet you would still protect her. What a ridiculous mess of a relationship, totally unlike you."

He Su listened and looked down as his wife crying in distraught. His expression revealed a little bit of warmth as he whispered, "I really did hate her for Le Zhen's rebellion. Two or three times after imprisoning her, I thought of sending an Order to force her suicide. I even once thought before handing the letter of surrender to Prince Consort of Yun Chang, I would kill her before my own death."

He dragged out a long sigh, then continued, perhaps to answer He Xia or only to himself, "The surrender letter has made it clear that I am willing to commit suicide as long as two lives of my Royal House are spared. As a father, my heart belongs to my child so why cannot I commit suicide for Shao'er? But as for the second person I wanted to protect, I thought again and again, until the end, the one I really wanted to exchange my life to protect, was still her..."

"King!" The Queen raised her head as she mournfully cried, choking, "It's my fault! I really deserve death!"

"You don't deserve death. Shao'er has already lost his father, how could he lose his mother to?" He Su sadly smiled. Since ascending to the throne, he was surrounded by numerous beauties due to holding the royal power, causing him to become increasingly cold towards the Queen. Yet now, when death was before his eyes, he realised the woman who had been staying by his side for all these years was the one person his heart was unwilling to leave. He softened his voice, "On our wedding night, I promised to love and protect only you in my lifetime. I have forgotten that promise over these days. But today, I don't know why I suddenly remembered it. Don't cry, Queen, I am merely fulfilling my promise."

He Xia stood at one side, coldly observing them.

He had come to bring hate, crusading into Gui Le. On the way, the Yun Chang army had been invincible, not a single battle lost, until sieging the city. He wanted to force He Su's suicide quickly, so he could mock them to the last minute and let his heart be amused.

He didn't expect this wasn't the soul-healing elixir he wanted to cure the hurt in his heart. Entering the city and seeing the barrenness of the Jing-An Ducal Residence made him feel regret and helplessness.

He Xia just quietly stood at the side, watching He Su softly saying goodbye to his wife, the Queen's grief too much for her body. He turned to his side where there was no one. The ruins of his home scantily decorated with fine silks and satins were printed in the depths of his eyes. The lonely wind lingered.

A hatred from being betrayed by those people began to crash into his heart like a volcanic eruption.

"King may not have to die. For our friendships in our childhood, I will now give you a chance." He Xia sneered, "As long as one of the three members of the Gui Le Royal House is willing to commit suicide, I will allow the other two to live, including King himself."

The Queen of Gui Le hadn't expected this sudden chance. She suddenly stopped crying, turning to look at He Xia. She earnestly asked, "Is Marquess of Jing-An saying the truth?" If it was true, then as long as she committed suicide, then her husband and her son would be spared.

He Xia had yet to reply, when He Su solemnly answered, "No need to say any more, Queen. The decision has already been made, there isn't any need to change it."

He Xia hadn't expected He Su to be so decisive. His face suddenly changed as his hand pressed against the sword hilt, continuing to sneer.

Every word, action, and expression between these two people reminded him of Yaotian. It stabbed at his heart with the intention to kill.

"King," The Queen of Gui Le's eyes were red as she sobbed, "It doesn't matter anything if I die, but if only King could..."

"Could what?" He Su stared at her, a deep coldness hid in his eyes. Seeing that she cried until her face was tearstained, he couldn't help bend down, gently wiping away her tears away. He knew this was the last chance he could talk to his wife. His voice was utterly gentle. "As your husband, how could I not protect you? Where on earth can you find a husband who can bear watching his wife die before him?"

He didn't know that his careless remark was like a sharpened knife stabbing straight into He Xia's heart.

Where on earth could you find a husband who could bear watching his wife die before him?

He Xia listened, his head buzzing as if someone had erupted. His vision was emptied.

His body shook a few times. He barely managed to steady himself. Sweat oozed out from his palm, dripping onto the sword hilt he touched. He pulled it out without hesitation, grinded his teeth. "Damn you all."

He Su abruptly looked up, the sword light already reaching into his eyes. He was born crown prince so although he was afraid of He Xia's abilities, he was still a man with resolute pride. He had long made up his mind to give up his life to protect his wife and son, so he stood in the same place with closed eyes, without panic or fear as he waited for the jolt of pain to come.

He Xia swung his sword down as his anger rose even more. He saw He Su's eyes closed, waiting for his death with such a dignified air. He simply felt that he deserved much more than a single sword cut. His gaze turned, falling on the Queen who was still flying in midair to block the King's body from being hit.

His swordsmanship was excellent. He immediately turned with the sword which then pierced without excess movement.

"Ahhh!" A scream was heard.

He Su suddenly opened her eyes wide. When he looked down, his wife had already fallen in a pool of blood.

"Queen! Queen!" He Su knelt down, holding the Queen in his arms, his voice already hoarse.

The Queen had been stabbed in the throat, and blood ejected like an arrow. Her body had already become limp, so there was no way she could make a sound. She opened her eyes, looking gratefully at He Su before slowly closing them again.

He Su saw her wrist hang down, never to make another movement again. He seemed to feel an icy coldness in his whole body. From the ground, he slowly raised his head towards He Xia, his eyes red. He spat out each word, "Why did you do that?"

The corners of He Xia's eyes twitched slightly, his face rather stupefied as if he had lost his own soul. His mouth sneered, however, "Let me tell you, there really are husbands who have watched their wife die before them."

"He Xia!" He Su roared, abruptly standing up. "Damn you to hell!" He thought his relationship with the Queen had become completely non-existent and never once thought watching the Queen die before him would cause his heart to shatter so much. The sudden pain seemed to drive away all of his reasoning as he charged towards He Xia. His two hands were outstretched, risking his life to pounce for He Xia's neck.

He Xia killed the Queen of Gui Le in one strike. Although his lips held a smile and his words were sharp as his sword, his heart was actually felt tipsy, as if the alcohol had gone to his head. He knew what he had done, yet he was unaware of it at the same time.

He Su charged towards him. As the guards were a hundred feet away, they couldn't come to his aid immediately. He Xia's combat skills were excellent, not to mention he held a sword, so there was no way He Su could get close. He Xia saw the looming black figure, took a step back, and instinctively raised his sword to stab.

He only felt like he had been jolted awake from this dream until a surge of blood spilled all over his face. He finally clearly saw He Su coming close, his wasted dead eyes glaring angrily at him.

He had been stabbed in the chest by He Xia's long sword, instantly dying. He Xia released his grip, causing He Su's corpse and the sword to slowly flop beside the Queen of Gui Le.

"Prince Consort!"

"Prince Consort..." His bodyguards rushed over.

He Xia waved his hand, ordering them to withdraw.

In the empty courtyard of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, he was the only one left, standing alone.

The couple quietly laid in a pool of blood. At first glance, they seemed like people who had relentlessly used their life and death to ridicule He Xia the man who now dominated the world

He conquered the four countries, his calvary trampling over all the mountains and rivers, yet was actually being ridiculed by a pair of corpses?

Utterly ridiculous!

“Hahaha...” He Xia tossed his head back and laughed.

In the silent night, amongst the residues of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, waves of hollow laughter spread.

Couple?

Didn't this couple hate each other? If they didn't, then how could they rattle the entire country, vainly causing Gui Le's ruin?

“I'm just thinking, if the House of Jing-An hadn't perished, would Yaotian still have been blessed enough to be the wife of Husband or not?”

The gentle voice was very familiar. He Xia turned abruptly. Nothing.

In the past, her smile was like flowers, slender fingers lifting the shaking bead curtain, revealing a pair of energetic eyes that deeply looked at him.

She had been on a carriage, quietly crying, been in the hall, modestly sitting and had been to the Prince Consort Residence, to accompany him while he drank or watched dance...

I really want to forget them.

Forget everything.

Until not one memory is left!

He Xia shuddered as he looked at He Su and the Queen's corpses. Heavy air seemed to refuse to let him straighten his spine, nor fall to his knees.

He bent over in pain, hiding his eyes with his face.

Couldn't forget it, he couldn't forget it.

The Jing-An Ducal Residence ruined before his eyes after a great victory. No one stood by his side, no one felt happy for him, and no one felt sorry for him.

At this moment, he finally realized how much he missed Yaotian.

He thought of his wife as only a tool to gain power, who had died while pregnant with his child. He didn't realize until now that he had always missed Yaotian.

When he received the full royal authority of Yun Chang, the distress in his heart felt so strong that it made him completely numb.

Lock.

The lock was on the door while Yaotian cried

“No, no, I don’t want the physician. I want the Prince Consort...the Prince Consort...”

“Hurry, find someone to call the Prince Consort over. Make him come here...”

“Luyi, I want to see him...I won’t make it, I want to see him. Hurry, he won’t not see me...”

He Xia’s body began to quake.

Lock, lock.

The lock was on the door.

The heavy lock, locked another space, locked up powerful hatred.

Open it, open it. It was merely a lock, merely a wooden door, but inside was his wife and his flesh & blood.

“Open it! Open that lock! Hurry, smash it for me, smash it!” He Xia clutched to his head as he howled, his handsome face twisting in pain.

He had the four countries. The slightest beckon with the wave of his hand would be tended to with utmost care. He could busy himself, but it was helpless against the emptiness and deathly silence in his heart.

Everyone had heartlessly left.

Where was home?

Where were his loved ones?

Yaotian’s calls before her death were omnipresent, forcing their way into his ears.

“Open the lock...open the lock! Someone, open the lock!”

“Prince Consort? Prince Consort?”

Ears recognizing human voices, He Xia suddenly looked up, his gaze piercing.

The people in front of him carefully studied his expression. “What lock is Prince Consort commanding us to open? I will immediately go do it.”

His trusted bodyguard.

He Xia dazedly looked at him, gradually coming back to his senses. He sighed, straightening out his numbed body. His gaze flicked to the ground where He Su and his wife’s corpses had cooled, their blood clotting on the ground. He Xia studied the patch of red, his expression suddenly heartless as he ordered, “Kill him.”

The soldier saw his expression and his heart trembled. He lowered his head to look at the freezing cold corpse of He Su, softly saying, “Report to Prince Consort, this man has already died.”

“No,” He Xia’s face was pale white. He widened his eyes, smiling mirthlessly, “Go, kill He Su’s prince. Not one of Gui Le’s Royal House is to be spared.”



His expression was so terrifying that even the soldier couldn't help stiffen at the command. During their conversation, He Xia told He Su that as long as He Su was willing to commit suicide in surrender, he would let two of the Royal House live. Now that both He Su and the Queen had died, what need was there to kill an insignificant little prince?"

"Prince Consort, that Prince of Gui Le, didn't you say..."

"What did I say?" He Xia fumed, "How dare you, to disobey my Order? Someone, take him away, twenty whacks with the army cane!" After a man had come to take away that soldier, he called someone up again, ordering, "Go kill the Prince of Gui Le, immediately! I refuse to let He Su's son live."

He already had the world. Why would he let his enemy's son live, when his own flesh and blood had died?

He Su's son had been locked up long ago, so it wasn't hard to kill him.

Very soon, the soldier sent back to report, "Prince Consort, He Shao has been killed."

He Xia processed this but without joy. He just said, "Oh really?" He quietly stood for a long time in the wind, before looking back at the guards around him. Each and every one of them watched him back quietly, the colour of horror in their eyes.

A burst of sadness hit He Xia's heart. He softly asked, "That He Su agreed to commit suicide, but changed his mind at the last minute. The Queen resisted alongside him too, both attempting to kill me. That's why I killed his son." He thought of the soldier who had just talked to him, asking, "Where's Tongcheng?"

"Report to Prince Consort, as Prince Consort ordered, he has been taken away for twenty whacks with army cane. He is currently kneeling outside, awaiting further instructions from Prince Consort."

He Xia said, "Give him medicine, let him rest for two days so he may properly heal."

Looking around at the now strangely unfamiliar Jing-An Ducal Residence, he sighed again.

The target had been confirmed to be Qierou. After waiting for ten days, Chu Beijie's party finally arrived.

While the crowd of generals were discussing matters in the army tent, Luoshang excitedly lifted the flap. "Bei Mo's Hua Can has arrived."

Everyone in the tent was delighted. "Welcome him in."

The words had yet to fall, when Hua Can stepped in looking all dusty. He was one of the young generals who Ruohan promoted after Ze Yin's retirement. Although he suffered the defeat at the Battle of Zhouqing, his spirit never dwindled. Even though his face was caked to a dark gray, the sparkle remained in his eyes. He scanned the tent, his eyes falling on Ruohan. "Main General," he showed the gesture of submission towards Ruohan, enetically. "I immediately set off after receiving Main General's secret letter. The morale of Bei Mo is in its craze, so there were quite a lot of people finding our hidden recruiters."

"Don't jump right in to the report. Allow me to introduce these people first." Ruohan was quite delighted seeing his subordinate. He beckoned towards the various generals, finally leading him to Chu Beijie. "This is the Duke of Zhen-Bei."

Hua Can looked at Chu Beijie, wariness and respect flashing in his eyes.

Chu Beijie knew it wasn't easy to lead this group of former enemies, so he wasn't particularly offended by his expression. He studied Hua Can for a moment, asking, "How many did you lead here?"

Hua Can still felt rather uneasy making his report to Chu Beijie and gazed questioningly at Ruohan before replying, "Our base in Bei Mo has already collected quite a few people. Thinking the eyes and ears of the Yun Chang army might detect us on the way, I only led a thousand men here. Although most are newcomers to the battlefield, I can guarantee that they're all good lads."

Pingting had long heard Hua Can's arrival, sending her heart pounding without end. From beside Chu Beijie, she spoke out, unable to restrain her excitement, "Have you heard from Yangfeng yet?"

Hua Can's eyes swiveled, seeing a fine-looking woman standing beside Chu Beijie. Although she wasn't close to a stunning beauty, she had a sort of graceful elegance that radiated. He immediately guessed who she most likely was and replied, quite respectfully, "Yes, I have sent people to the address Miss wrote and found the Main General's wife."

Since Pingting helped Bei Mo against Dong Lin, the generals of Bei Mo were quite close to her so Hua Can's attitude to her was much more natural than to Chu Beijie.

Pingting hurriedly asked, "Are they all okay? When Yangfeng saw my letter, did she say anything?"

Hua Can smiled, "The Main General's wife said, everyone has their own aspirations, so she can't do anything but refuse Miss Bai's wish to let her and the children hide in the mountains in safety."

Pingting was a little stunned. She stared at Hua Can's smiling face. Her eyes suddenly lit up after a few moments. She softly exclaimed, "My god, she actually brought the children here!"

Several dozen white pigeons instantly fluttered their wings to lift off her heart, flying and scattering the fragrance of delight and surprise in every direction.

Yangfeng had come. Yangfeng who detested war and always wanted to avoid everything about it actually came.

Where were the children?

*Changxiao, my Changxiao.*

Pingting was suddenly heading straight towards the exit. When she got to the door, she suddenly stopped, hurried back, and pulled Chu Beijie outside by the hand.

She had always been calm, so this was a rare moment of excitement that even Chu Beijie couldn't quite comprehend. But since Pingting was the one who obediently offered her little hand, there was no way Chu Beijie would let go of it. He allowed himself to be pulled towards the door while he asked, "Is this to welcome Yangfeng?" With one lift of the flap, the two people disappeared behind the door.

The generals watched the two disappear out of the army tent, both surprised and envious.

Hua Can stood on the spot for a while, turning to Ruohan to sigh, "This Miss Bai is amazing indeed. I wanted to keep her guessing, but she guessed it in one phrase."

Ruohan's mood was quite good. He patted him on the shoulder, laughing, "A pity, you didn't get to see what the Battle of Kanbu looked like."

He then went with Hua Can to attend the men and horses who arrived with food and water. There were many piled here and there on the grass, sleeping.

Pingting led Chu Beijie quickly to the entrance. She immediately spotted the swan-like Yangfeng in the crowd of chickens. Although her features showed exhaustion, not a trace of her gentle beauty was lost.

Yangfeng had also saw Pingting from afar. She waved to Pingting, chuckling, "Pingting."

"Yangfeng." Pingting yelled with delighted surprise. She let go of Chu Beijie, picking up both of Yangfeng's hands. She squeezed them.

She assessed Yangfeng from top to bottom. Although she didn't open her mouth to speak, the ripples of excitement couldn't be hidden in her eyes. The two held each other's hands, watching the other for a very long time before Pingting broke the silence. Her voice was rather critical as she sighed, "Geez, why didn't you listen to me? You should be running far away in a time of soldiers and weapons. It's very dangerous here."

"You're not willing to lie dormant yourself, so how could you ask others to do that too? I too must do what I want to do the most, that is, to come to the military camp and personally witness how this chaos will settle." Yangfeng's gentle face was much more determined than usual, as she faintly smiled, "I said it before didn't I? I will personally witness my husband's words become reality."

This firm expression, prior to losing Ze Yin, had never once appeared on Yangfeng's face before.

Pingting couldn't help but feel slightly surprised. She lowered her voice, "Then what about the children?"

Yangfeng had yet to reply, when a small head popped out from behind Yangfeng, revealing a broad grin. "Auntie!"

"Ze Qing, you've gotten taller." Pingting lovingly stroked his head, her own gaze unable to stop searching her surroundings.

Yangfeng knew who Pingting was looking for. She pursed her lips and smiled, "You don't need to search, over there." She pointed behind Pingting.

Children grew too fast. It hadn't been long, but Changxiao seemed to have grown a lot and seemed even more mischievous than Ze Qing now. He just arrived to an unfamiliar place but was curious about everything. He hadn't realized his Lady Mother had arrived and somehow slipped behind Pingting, coincidentally being attracted to another familiar object.

"Knife-knife..."

Changxiao had a very good memory. He once played with this dazzling shiny thing which caused Ze Qing to be hit by Yangfeng. He recognized it at first glance and clung around Chu Beijie's leg without any further explanation. He tried to grope for the Divine Soul sword on Chu Beijie's waist.

Chu Beijie lowered his head and saw this little thing trying to climb up his leg who then looked up at him. The thing had rather crystal-black pupils with a clear light in them and was trying to steal the precious sword on his waist. He wasn't afraid of the Duke of Zhen-Bei who no one else dared to lay a finger on.

This little kid sure had great courage.

Back then, even his brother's two princes didn't dare to so blatantly climb up him.

Chu Beijie carefully assessed this little thing. His nose was straight, his eyes were stubborn, and the more he studied it, the more he liked it. He suddenly thought of his and Pingting's child that had quietly been swallowed by fate, sending ruthless bursts of pain into his heart.

He hadn't expected that both of Ze Yin's sons could walk now.

He felt deep envy in his heart.

He had never particularly liked children, but this time his heart softened. He couldn't help bend down to pick up Changxiao and playfully squeeze Changxiao's chubby little cheek. "What a naughty boy, why do you not obediently follow your mother?"

Changxiao, who had been too excited from his play, was reminded. He looked left and right, finally seeing that familiar figure. He instantly began to yell, "Mother!"

A very sweet and pleasant voice rang out as he waved with both hands in Pingting and Yangfeng's direction. He struggled to leave Chu Beijie's arms.

Chu Beijie realized he wasn't willing to let go, so he followed his gaze to look in Pingting and Yangfeng's direction, and Pingting happened to turn to look in their direction.

In the end, a mother's nature overrules everything. Hearing Changxiao's calls, Pingting's heart felt like it was being tightened by rope which slacked after cooling down her excitement from earlier. She could no longer hold back at that moment, her tears swelled up in her eyes as she walked towards Chu Beijie. "Changxiao, Changxiao, I really wanted to see you." Her eyes were filled with gentleness as she softly murmured, her tears hanging off her cheeks.

Changxiao did not seem understand the taste of parting. Seeing his mother, he was so happy he waddled in Pingting's arms, giggling.

Chu Beijie stood at one side, transfixed like a wooden chicken.

He was turned to stone, listening to the Changxiao in Pingting's arms, saying "Mother".

A rainbow suddenly lifted, painting right across the clouds of his mind, emitting colourful light. One band of colour, then the second, the third...

Numerous colours began to spin, tightly surrounding the bigger and smaller figures imprinted in his eyes. The sweetness and gentleness he felt at that moment was so beautiful that he simply couldn't believe it to be true.

Pingting held onto Changxiao as she turned around. She returned Chu Beijie's gaze before lowering her head shyly, her expression rather apologetic. She whispered, "Duke, this is Changxiao."

Although this one sentence was softly said to him, it sounded more beautiful than the melody of the gods. Chu Beijie knew he would never, ever, forget these words. This dignified Duke of Zhen-Bei actually had the urge to burst into tears right there and then, in front of the huge crowds.

Changxiao, this was Changxiao.

Pingting's son.

His son too!

Chu Beijie's limbs seemed to have flown into the skies. He gaped at the happy mother and son in front of him. He didn't dare make a single expression nor did a muscle on his face twitch as they would all cause the emotion he felt to overflow, his tears of joy irrepressible.

This little guy was his and Pingting's...

Even though he tried for ages, trying to talk several times, he was too excited to speak a single word.

Pingting saw him like that and couldn't help give him a bit of an anxious look.

Changxiao turned his head to look at him, eyeing the Divine Spirit soul again. He delightedly shouted, "Knife-knife!" as he reached out in midair to climb onto Chu Beijie.

Yangfeng was holding onto Ze Qing, a smile in her lips as she watched at one side.

Chu Beijie's throat was dry and hoarse, numerous joyous songs roaring like waves. It seemed that he needed to jump right up and scream away the burning fire in his heart to the sky several times. But his body was uncontrollable, and it stayed rooted to the spot.

Finally, a few words were painstakingly squeezed out of his hoarse throat, "Wait a minute."

Pingting and the others were shocked as they watched Chu Beijie suddenly turn, rushing into one of the closest tents. Once he went in, the soldiers inside rapidly came out, each with a look of puzzled doubt, suggesting that Chu Beijie had driven them away.

The crowd circled the tent. There was suddenly a violent sound shattering the wind.

*Fwaah, fwaaah...*

Even those across the tent could clearly hear the sharp sound of wind breaking continuously.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei seemed to be maniacally waving his sword.

The thick tent skin was trembling, as if the tent was about to split apart any time soon.

After a while, the sword seemed sound and stopped. The earth seemed to have silenced too. Flap! The tent door was violently lifted, shocking the nervously waiting crowd with its force.

Chu Beijie was covered in sweat as he strode out from inside. His hand was pressed on the Divine Spirit sword, his gaze piercing. The confidence of the Duke of Zhen-Bei pretty much returned, but his red eyes said otherwise.

He headed towards Pingting, staring at Changxiao. He rightfully took over and began to hug him, "Good son, call me Father."

Changxiao was quite stubborn. He was usually never this obedient. Perhaps of their connection by blood did he surprisingly agree. He really did, quite delightedly, say, "Father." He then looked down to play with Chu Beijie's cloak.

Chu Beijie felt his heart scream in joy with his word, "Father". At the same time, it felt like his throat clogged even more as he hugged Changxiao tightly. The small and soft body felt light, and he felt like the hand that gripped his sword mustn't touch this little thing or it would crumble.

*It was so fragile that it was sad*

But it was this fragile little life, this tender call of “Father”, that made even the most sturdiest of weapons or cavalry made him brim with confidence. Chu Beijie’s nose felt both sour and painful, as he felt his son in his arms. The overwhelming joy of being a father flooded into him. His high spirits made him burst out laughing.

Who in the world was more fortunate than him?

Nothing in this world could replace this tender sound nor Pingting’s one smile.

Chu Beijie roared in laughter for a long time. He was so happy that he was almost about to cry again, but he managed to control himself in the end. He softly exclaimed to Pingting, “This is one arrow of revenge is really quite harsh.” His voice was full of desperation.

All sorts of the pain Pingting suffered were dissipated in that very moment. Seeing Chu Beijie’s excitement, she felt rather guilty herself. She lowered her head and spoke as quietly as a mosquito, “How can Pingting mention it, if Duke isn’t going to ask? But Pingting was quite stubborn about this so don’t be angry, Duke. Pingting will accept any punishment, okay?”

Chu Beijie’s piercing eyes studied her, as if using his eyes to hold her so that she could forever be hidden in the depths of his eyes.

Angry?

He had the feeling of déjà vu.

The wind in the campsite silently blew past, hurling them back to that Three-Swallow Cliff. That day, archers had been lying in ambush in all directions, ready to fire. He Xia had appeared from above them, looking romantic as they forced him to make the five-year truce.

That day, he had been on the horse while Pingting was in his arms.

That day, he had been angry, absolutely furious.

That day was the first time he tasted heartbreak, the first time he realised that he loved a woman, the first time he had stepped onto this road of a thousand twists.

Both love and hate, happiness and sadness, were densely interwoven together. He hadn’t been able to distinguish the taste between them and gained unshaken values from that.

No, he wasn’t angry any more.

How could he be angry? He already had so much.

Chu Beijie hugged Changxiao with one arm, his hand vigorously rubbing Changxiao’s cheeks. His other arm held Pingting and hoped that time would stop at this moment forever.

Pingting was held by his sturdy hand and raised her head to look at Chu Beijie dotingly hugging their cute son. In the past, this scene was one she could only dream about and it had become true. Her eyes felt a stinging warmth.

She bit her lip, staring at the beautiful scene for a moment. She softly asked, “Duke isn’t angry anymore?”

“Is Duchess no longer angry?” Chu Beijie smiled wryly, “You cheated death once and cheated once again, so I have suffered enough as well. Please Duchess, have mercy, don’t punish me anymore. The wrongdoings I have done before, please forgive me.”

Pingting was too ashamed to look up, but sweet laughter played on her lips. She clutched tightly to Chu Beijie’s hand, saying, “Duke, there are people standing around us.”

“So what?” Chu Beijie’s gaze swept around and couldn’t help toss back his head and laughing again. “Let them know that the one thing they must never do is offend their most beloved woman.”

Correct.

Women always had ways to punish their men.

They would only think about their beloved man, and likewise, they were only willing to suffer heartbreak for their beloved man.

## Chapter 67

Qierou, Yun Chang. The city was still on the peaceful side. The peasants didn’t know their little town had become the prey of the Duke of Zhen-Bei as they continued their daily lives.

The Governor’s accumulation of anger was still growing.

None of his subordinates found it difficult to find that those two were creating trouble everywhere, deliberately trying to find fault with the Governor by mixing their foul stench into Qierou. Even mud had a temper and the Governor’s ability to bear until now was still considered an amazing feat itself.

“They came back again?”

“Yes.” His subordinates were rather uncomfortable, “After respectfully sending them away, they would return the next day.”

The corners of Fanlu’s twitched, his gaze flickering backwards.

Dujing hurriedly stepped forward, bending down to report, “The silver has been sent according to Sir’s instructions.”

Sigh, those two had far too much of an appetite.

Though it was to be expected, who told him to follow the wrong person, becoming one of Senior Official Gui’s people? The Gui family had fallen now, and he always got a beating by the others. Otherwise, there was no way he’d be held down so miserably by these two officials.

Even his clerk’s eyebrows drooped considerably. Quite a lot of the strands in his goatee had snapped too.

“Sir,” his subordinate suggested, “those two only refuse to go because they see that our Qierou has a bit of wealth. I heard last time they went to Xian Na City, the Xian Na Governor gave them two chicken-heart sized red rubies, and they left in glee. I reckon...”

Fanlu coldly harrumphed. “Chicken-heart sized red rubies? Where are we to find chicken-heart sized rubies for them? We’ve already given them quite a lot of money.”

Dujing stood beside Fanlu, hesitating.

Fanlu pulled a face, while the good natured subordinate backed away.

“Sir, it’s actually quite simple.” Dujing stepped forward, his eyes narrowed as he said, “Sir may not have precious gemstones, but Qierou has people. Although Qierou is a small city, there are still a few wealthy families, so there must be some ancestral treasures that can satisfy Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng.”

Fanlu’s expression changed, “You want me to extort peasants out of their family heirlooms?” He had been trained in the army as an expert spy so he could readily kill or set fires, but he had never once thought about extorting peasants.

Dujing wryly smiled, as he rubbed his hands. “It’s because Sir doesn’t agree, that’s why I never said it. But Sir, this Sir Pu Guang and Pu Sheng staying here isn’t a good plan either. What if you really do annoy them and they go back to the capital to rattle off to the Prince Consort. Sir will be in a lot of danger. They’re also on very good terms with the Prince Consort’s favourite, General Fei Zhaoxing.

Fanlu felt a sensation like he had just taken a whole mouthful of lard. He frowned, “Who would freely hand over their priceless ancestral heirlooms? I’m afraid we won’t be able to buy it either.”

Dujing frowned, his expression looking very upset. “We don’t mean to do evil; it’s really only to protect ourselves. You are a governor, holding all of the lives of the peasants in your hand. Isn’t it quite simple task to ask to borrow an item? I’m trying to think for Sir.”

Fanlu felt incredibly uncomfortable.

Being the governor of this rubbish city wasn’t cool at all. Ever since He Xia gained all the power, each day got harder than the day before. He even went as far to think that it would’ve been better if he stayed in the army, happily being a lowly spy.

But as the various forces of Yun Chang clashed, every single Gui party’s lives had been at stake, just the slightest mistake would attract a massive disaster. Who wouldn’t know better than asking for trouble?

He wasn’t exactly a sincere man. After thinking about it, he clenched his teeth and nodded. “Let’s do that then. I just don’t know which family treasure will satisfy them.”

Seeing him nod, Dujing sighed in relief. He quickly answered, “No need for Sir to feel distressed over. I have already prepared a list.” He took out a scrap of paper from his sleeves, opened it and started to read.

A cabinet officer hurried through the door, reporting, “Sir, those two generals have returned.”

“Welcome them into the main room and serve them.” Fanlu’s eyebrows were tightly furrowed as he turned to Dujing, “Don’t bother, just choose someone suitable and make sure they’re gone as soon as possible. The food supply team should be arriving today, so I will go outside the city to deal with them. That’s good though, I won’t be able to see them as I really don’t want to see or bow or pamper their disgusting faces.” He took the light crossbow that never left his side off the table and slipped through the back hall. He left behind a smiling Dujing who actually had a headache. He then went to attend to those insatiable Sirs at the main entrance.

Zuiju was in the rear of the residence. Now that she could freely walk around the Governor Residence, her freedom increased considerably. But it had been a while since going out, so her boredom was quite justified. She paced around, plucking all sorts of herbs from the corners of the courtyard



Seeds had been scattered not long ago, so only two or three tiny shoots popped out.

She had a natural innate love of plants. She carefully applied fertiliser to each one of them before stretching and standing up again.

The familiar cabinet officer came to report, “Miss Zuiju, Sir said that he is going outside the city and is afraid that he might not be able to make it back in time, so that you can eat yourself.”

Zuiju replied, “Ok”, rather unenthusiastically.

That Fanlu, when he was in front of her, she was dying for him to disappear as soon as possible, but when he wasn’t, she felt a little gloomy.

“Just take the dinner to my room.”

Dinner was served; Zuiju sat alone facing the shadows casted by the candle. She jabbed a few dishes with her chopsticks, losing her appetite.

It seemed the food supply team had arrived again. It was really quite disquieting the way they come every so often.

Thinking of food supply for the army, she couldn’t help think of her Teacher whose whereabouts were unknown, and Pingting whose soul was lonely. Zuiju felt even more upset, seeing her own lonely shadow being imprinted on the wall.

She put down her chopsticks, the corners of her eyes reddening.

With that hateful Fanlu around, although he always angered her until her teeth itched, she would never feel so sad like now.

Zuiju raised her sleeve to wipe away her tears when she suddenly heard laughter floating through the windows. There were both men and women and not long later, another girl giggled before singing a melody. Zuiju stood up, coming to the door and happened to see one of the passing maids. She waved at her, frowning, “Who’s here again? They’re so noisy.”

The maid answered, “Of course it’s those two something Sirs. They’re here again. Advisor Du has sent for a prostitute called Chun something who is currently accompanying him while he drinks.”

Zuiju knew those two sucked up to He Xia to gain his favour and created all sorts of trouble for Fanlu. She was quite disgusted by them as she eyed the bright lit room guest room. She thought that even if she returned into the room, the noise would be irritable so she simply stayed outside, heading towards the pavilion at the rear of the residence.

She arrived at the pavilion and the evening breeze greeted her, much more comfortable than expected. Zuiju’s mood was a bit better. She sat in the pavilion, still puzzling over when Fanlu returned when she suddenly heard footsteps from behind. Her heart lifted and she blurted, “You evil man, finally back?” When she turned, her expression changed considerably.

The potbellied Pu Guang had drank quite a lot in the guest room. Seeing how his younger brother Pu Sheng had pulled the prostitute Yingchun down, ready to go out it, he thought that he might as well pull the one called Guihua down the stairs and look for another room, pleasuring through the night.

But he had unexpectedly drunk too much. After a few stops he dizzily stumbled down the stairs and Miss Guihua was already gone when he turned back. The sky had already darkened as he stumbled throughout the residence until finally stumbling by this little pavilion.

Then he suddenly heard a woman's clear and crisp voice. "You evil man, finally back?"

Pu Guang raised his head. The woman quietly sat there under the moon and her looks were really quite good. He instantly thought he'd struck lucky and began to pervertedly smile. "Baby, I'm coming. I'll pleasure you so much that you can die happy..." With all his drunkenness, he rushed forwards, touching those tender little hands, pressing forward with his ugly face.

Zuiju hadn't had her guard up. Only until he'd touched her did she scream, "Kyaa." She leapt up to her feet from the stone chair, reached out and shoved the fat Pu Guang onto the ground.

The places her hand touched felt disgusting. Zuiju had been with her Teacher since childhood and had always been treated with respect. Apart from the damn Fanlu, there hadn't been any other man who dared take liberties with her. Thinking that much didn't make her anger cool, she went closer and slapped him twice, making a "paah-paah" sound.

She was a woman and didn't slap people very often, so her slaps weren't that strong.

Pu Guang had suffered the two light slaps, but he didn't leave. He drunkenly stepped forward again. He smiled in glee, "Such fragrant hands, little beauty, give it to me again. It's to both of our advantage, you give me your fragrant hands and I'll give you a meatstick to eat."

Zuiju had never heard such things so she was stunned, not knowing what he was talking about. She had yet to open her mouth when a sharp arrow broke the wind. The whoosh directly hit Pu Guang's chest.

The arrow came without warning, both rapid and accurate. Pu Guang's eyes bulged out for a moment like frogs, not making a single sound as his body fell towards the floor, below Zuiju's feet.

Zuiju was taken aback. She abruptly took a step back, her back crashing into what seemed like a person's arms. She looked back in dismay. When she saw his face properly, she immediately sighed in relief. "It's you..."

It was strange, but she felt relieved.

Fanlu's expression was extremely twisted. He stood there, staring, for a long time. One hand held his light crossbow, the other holding Zuiju's arms as he pulled her forward.

Zuiju was stumbled with his pulls. "What are you doing?"

Fanlu pulled her to Pu Guang's corpse. Although Zuiju was a doctor, she was still a girl and was afraid of the dead. She wanted to step back, not expecting that Fanlu would viciously tug her forwards, not letting her to move an inch back.

He loaded another arrow on his crossbow with one hand. He gave it to Zuiju, "Hold it."

Zuiju saw how scary his expression was and obediently took it.

Fanlu beckoned at Pu Guang's corpse with his chin. "Shoot him."

"He's already dead."

"Are you going to shoot or not?" Fanlu stared at her viciously, his eyes rather red

In the moment Zuiju hesitated, Fanlu obstinately leaned over, grabbed her hand, and pulled the trigger.

Zuiju closed her eyes. The arrow had already flown with a whoosh until it deeply lodged itself in Pu Guang's throat.

He had only just died so his blood was still warm. His throat's blood splattered all over the ground.

Fanlu took the light crossbow from Zuiju's hands. He patted her cheek, wanting her to open her eyes. He said in a grave voice, "If someone dares say those words to you, shoot him with an arrow before he continues, understood?"

He was quite fierce and barbaric right now, not having his usually slovenly expression. Even Zuiju didn't dare argue, so she nodded. Her expression rather puzzled, "What did those words mean?"

Fanlu narrowed his eyes at her. She had no idea what he was thinking about. He revealed a strange expression, then enigmatically laughed, "It's not something particularly bad, but only I can say them to you, not others."

Although Zuiju didn't quite understand, she guessed that it definitely wasn't something good. She glared at him, "As a dog, you can only bark." Her blush was faint, but she lowered her head anyway.

Fanlu chuckled, turning around to go. Zuiju hurriedly stopped him, "Where are you going?" There was a terrifying looking corpse beside her, so there was no way she'd let herself be left alone there.

Fanlu shrugged, "He has another brother. One's gone, so the other has to accompany him to death too. Unless I let him off, so he can have revenge? You guard this corpse; it better not be gone."

He strode away, a few shadows flickering in the courtyard until he disappeared.

Zuiju froze on the spot. She turned to look back at Pu Guang's body in the moonlight. The little puddle beside him rippled with a strangle cold light. She couldn't help but feel chills run up her spine. Her hands hugged her body.

Fanlu had actually left for half an hour.

Zuiju looked at Pu Guang's body. She felt like she was being roasted on the fire. Whenever she heard movement, she would nervously retrieve her head until it was hidden inside the pavilion, in fear of attracting people that would then notice Pu Guang's corpse.

Pu Guang was a missionary amongst the Yun Chang officials. It would be no trivial matter if his body were found in Qierou.

She craned her neck, fully wishing Fanlu would quickly return but that figure didn't appear. Anger towards Fanlu flipped over and over again in her stomach. She swore to herself that she would never forgive him when she saw him.

When a shadow flickered in her sight, her eyes lit up immediately.

Fanlu had the limp Pu Sheng over his shoulder as he breezily returned.

"You're finally back; that totally scared me to death." Zuiju's heart felt like it was flying. She didn't feel afraid any more, now that she'd seen Fanlu's face.

Fanlu looked at her, "Why are you still here?"

Zuiju stiffened, asking, "When you told me to guard the corpse and that it better not be gone?"

“What’s cool to look about a corpse? He won’t run away.” Fanlu linked, laughing, “I was joking, but you took it seriously anyway?”

Zuiju almost fainted with anger. She grinded her teeth, “I wanted to help you, but you played me instead.”

Fanlu assessed her from top to bottom. “Look at you. At most your help will backfire.”

The earlier fierceness had gone, replaced by that unserious grin again. He kicked the Pu Guang on the ground while weighing the Pu Sheng on his shoulders. He frowned, “How heavy, that stomach of flesh, blood and fat. I guess I totally shouldn’t’ve feed them all sorts of delicacies, if I had known that one arrow was enough to get rid of them.” He turned to Zuiju, “I am going to hide them one by one, so obediently wait for me here.”

Zuiju nodded, and watched Fanlu disappear with Pu Sheng in the distance before abruptly coming back to her senses. She was furious, “Dammit, who is going to obediently wait for you?” She stomped several times and stormed back to her room, not caring about the body on the ground any more.

Her heart only fumed, no longer as jumpy and afraid as before.

She sat inside her room for a long time, not feeling sleepy as she stared outside the door. By midnight, Fanlu came in as expected. He swaggered inside, swaggered to a seat, picked up a tea jug on the table, and poured it in his mouth. He mumbled to himself, “The corpse had to be hid and the blood on the ground had to be wiped off, busying me all night. Sigh, those two guys are heavier than pigs. It really wasn’t easy taking their corpses to the hiding place. Did so much walking, my shoulders are so painful they can barely lift my hands.” The more he said, the more pitiful he seemed.

Although Zuiju was pretty angry, she knew this was all for her. She felt a little sorry. She could only stand up and walk to his side. In a rather awkward tone, she asked, “Where does it hurt?”

“Shoulders.”

Zuiju softly massaged for him. Massaging was one of the things she learned from her teacher. Her technique was well-grounded, but her strength was a little weak.

Fanlu didn’t care whether her strength was strong or weak, being massaged like this was a rare blessing itself. He narrowed his eyes as he merrily teased, “Feels very nice. This shoulder must have gotten good karma in its previous lives to have such beautiful hands massage them.”

Zuiju glared at him, “I know, your next few words won’t be any good. If you dare say another, I won’t massage for you anymore.”

Fanlu sighed, but he really did obediently close his mouth.

After a while, Zuiju asked, “Now that they’re dead, how will you explain to the people above?”

Fanlu didn’t answer.

Zuiju said, “You can speak. I’ll massage for you as long as you don’t say anything mean.”

Fanlu finally answered, “They didn’t die, but they received enough jewels and gold so they left satisfied.”

“Why’s that?”

“Organising false illusions are my forte. Who else can clear up two fatty pigs in just half a night?”

He was indeed an expert in organising false illusions, as he was the one who tricked the world of Bai Pingting's death.

Zuiju remembered how he had gone to kill Pu Sheng, actually using up half an hour, probably because he had formed a scenario by then. She didn't ask for any more.

The two people chatted in the room, gossiped a bit until both felt a little sleepy.

Zuiju studied him, "Don't you have paperwork tomorrow? Why don't you go sleep?"

Fanlu yawned, "Why sleep? The sky will brighten in an hour. You saw a dead man, so undoubtedly spending the night alone would be scary. I'll accompany you until the sky brightens and you can sleep when morning comes. There'll be light everywhere, so you won't be afraid."

Zuiju listened to his words, her heart immediately softening. Her voice had lightened too, "I'm not afraid. You've been busy all night, so boiling through the rest of your energy isn't good. Go to sleep soon."

Fanlu sighed again, "To be honest, when I kill a man, I'll have nightmares for the next few days. I won't be able to sleep at all anyway."

Zuiju frowned as she said, "I'll give you a prescription for sleep, okay?"

"I have such prescriptions too that will definitely work. It's just that the component was hard to find."

Zuiju was curious. "What rare herbs? I'll help you think of where to find them."

"If genius Doctor Zuiju would let me hug her to sleep then..." His words had yet to fall when his shoulder had been thumped by Zuiju's fist. Fanlu helplessly said, "I said that the component was hard to find."

## Chapter 68

The tails of dreams were hard to catch; Chu Beijie was unable to sleep.

But Changxiao was buried in his arms, long fallen asleep obediently. His soft little body but rather heavy breathed evenly as he stuck his hot little face against Chu Beijie's shoulder.

"Can I really put him down?" Chu Beijie had maintained the same position for a long time. He lowered his voice as much as he could, worrying as he asked.

"Yes."

"Wouldn't it wake him up?"

"No. He's already deep in sleep."

Chu Beijie studied the son in his arms and frowned, "I reckon he'll wake up."

Pingting was both amused and angry. She walked over and skilfully took their son from his arms, wrapping him in a blanket. Chu Beijie took just one step towards the blanket. He lowered his head, studying every detail carefully, his eyes flashing in the candlelight never leaving his son

“Be lighter.” Chu Beijie nervously watched, “Be careful not to wake him or he’ll cry.”

Pingting laughed for a long time. She straightened up and looked at Chu Beijie, unable to straighten her mouth, breaking into a soft chuckle. “They all say fathers are strict while mothers are gentle, but it’s the opposite.”

Chu Beijie knew he was being too nervous. He grabbed her slender body, pulling her closer to him. He clenched his teeth, “Who’s the one hurting the other now?” He didn’t wait for an explanation before nibbling lightly on Pingting’s delicate earlobe.

“Ow...” Pingting gently yelped, her ear stinging a little, bringing with it a warm and damp feeling.

It seemed that after Chu Beijie nibbled, his tongue immediately followed. Pingting instantly flushed bright red and reached out a hand to push his chest. She shyly said, “What is Duke doing?”

“I am thinking how I can fight without soldiers.” Chu Beijie chuckled softly, spraying hot air into Pingting’s ear. “Does Duchess give up?”

“Using teeth to bite people isn’t elegant...”

There was no way his metal-like broad shoulders could be so easily pushed away by Pingting. After having enough of dawdling, he grabbed onto Pingting, quietly heading outside. The two people went outside the tent where the bright stars in the sky suddenly appeared before their eyes.

Chu Beijie sighed, “This kind of atmosphere needs qin sound to go with it.” He turned and looked at Pingting.

Pingting said, “Where can you find a qin in such wilderness?”

Chu Beijie laughed without a reply. His deep eyes watched her, her blush spreading ear to ear. Under his gaze perhaps no one could remain calm under, Pingting began to smile instead. She shifted her position in Chu Beijie’s grasp, leading him past the quiet barracks and finding a quiet forest to sit down.

“Since there’s no qin, why don’t Duke allow Pingting to sing a song?”

“What song?” asked Chu Beijie.

Pingting revealed a grin, “A song of rebellion to apologise to Duke?”

“Oh?” Chu Beijie quietly thought for a moment. He softened his voice, “Why does Pingting need to apologise to me?”

For some reason, Pingting was actually startled by this question. She lowered her thick eyelashes, thinking for a long time. She slowly replied, “Probably because of Pingting’s guilt due to her stubbornness that caused so many hardships to Duke.”

Her head was lowered and Chu Beijie felt a wave of pity. He held her in his arms, murmuring, “As long as you and Changxiao are both by my side, countless hardships will be nothing to me.”

This wasn’t exactly the first time he’d held Pingting like this since their reunion. But the this moment’s feeling was much more soothing the days before. The scene where Chu Beijie held Changxiao in his arms had already been engraved into her heart.

She couldn’t help tightly hold onto Chu Beijie, letting her head be muffled in his broad chest. In a low voice, she asked “Does Duke regret meeting Pingting?”

Chu Beijie didn't answer. He just reached out to softly lift her chin, planting a warm kiss on her beautiful red lips.

The stars twinkled while oblique shadows were pulled out from the forest behind, guarding this deeply affectionate couple.

"Allow me to sing you a song tonight." Chu Beijie finally loosened his grip around Pingting and faintly smiled, pondering carefully. He then actually began to sing.

"If spring love only, autumn nostalgia serves; if autumn nostalgia only, bitter parting serves; never betray..."

His voice was deep and rich, seeped with many emotions. Each word jumped out of his throat like jade beads, brightening the forest.

"Never betray..."

His clear voice rang in the night, the silent forests, wind, and darkness, applauding in their own way.

No qin.

But Chu Beijie's deep voice didn't need to be accompanied by qin.

He put his heart into singing, particularly the words "Never Betray". His words seemed to dance back the Jing-An Ducal Residence, the confrontation at the Battle of Kanbu, and the other numerous times they stumbled together on the way. All of their pain and memories flipped out, following the wind.

The injuries lifted, going back to where they came from.

The sound wandered through the forest, just how it embedded itself in every memory. Pingting listened, captivated. Tears began to fall from her eyes, falling straight onto the stretch of grass and causing a momentary flower-like splash, when the singing stopped.

The forest was very quiet, letting Pingting listen to every long breath of Chu Beijie. Perhaps, every heartbeat too.

Pingting lifted her sleeves, quietly wiping the corners of her eyes without changing her expression. "What does Duke understand?"

Chu Beijie dotingly enveloped her in his embrace. He whispered, "I understand that you have never changed your mind despite the hundreds and thousands of twists."

"Never changed my mind despite the hundreds and thousands of twists..." Pingting contemplated the words.

"Clever Bai Pingting, stupid Bai Pingting, kind Bai Pingting, and the evil Bai Pingting, are all the Bai Pingting I love." Chu Beijie breathed out before asking his own question, "Why would I regret it?"

Pingting's eyes held tears in them. She looked up slowly, watching the clear light in his eyes, firm with decision.

The shattering sound came out from nowhere, gradually becoming smoke that hid in the clouds, only leaving its faint echo in the heart.

Let all sorrow and buried hatred vanish like smoke into the clouds.

The pain that even alcohol could not drown the two's desires no longer mattered

When she was pregnant, she cried while spilling the mixture all over the cold ground, just like the despair that overpowered her world.

Behind her, he had chased thousands of miles with his soldiers, filling the sky with the fire of murder.

They once sworn to the moon to overcome everything. They had to overcome so many incidents in the past, so many tests.

Her gaze shifted towards the sky. She suddenly exclaimed with joy, "The moon's out."

"Where?"

Her slender fingers that were almost as thin as spring onion leapt towards the sky. "Over there, can Duke see it?"

Chu Beijie didn't turn his head, just stared at her, as if wanting to drown her in those inky depths. After a few moments, his handsome face revealed a faint smile, "I see, it's over there."

He lowered his head, softly kissing those trembling eyelashes.

The two spent the whole night saying nothing but nonsense, yet neither felt a trace of weariness. At early morning, the sky slowly brightened, its rays spreading bit by bit through the forest, lifting the fog. They then finally returned to the tent, seeing that Changxiao had already woken a while ago. He didn't cry nor make trouble but examined the tassels on the edge of the blanket as he couldn't pull them off.

"You're already being naughty right after opening your eyes." Pingting went to hug him up, but Changxiao was still far too interested in those tassels, his tiny hand refusing to let go so that a corner of the blanket was lifted with him.

Chu Beijie only boasted, "Good boy, he shares my toughness."

Changxiao turned to see him coming closer and yelped with excitement. He didn't care about the tassels anymore so he released his hold, causing the blanket to fall onto the ground. Changxiao only bothered to reach out to Chu Beijie with his two little hands.

Chu Beijie was even more delighted. "Look, he really likes me." His hand reached out to hug Changxiao.

Pingting laughed "What like? He's only interested in your Divine Spirit sword."

As expected, once Changxiao entered Chu Beijie's arms, he wholeheartedly tries to get the hilt at Chu Beijie's waist. The Divine Spirit sword wasn't light. He was small and in Chu Beijie's arms, so there was no way he could grope for the belt no matter how he twisted. He yelled in dissatisfaction, "Knife-knife!"

"Good son. If you like it, Father will give it to you."

"Are there fathers like you? He's still young; such an obvious weapon is not a good choice to give."

The family of three were having their fun, when Moran lifted the flap and entered. His voice was quite refreshed as he reported, "The few people that Duke recently sent private letters ago have already arrived."

"They should be coming over the next few days." Chu Beijie then asked, "How many have arrived?"

"More than twenty."



“Eight or nine was expected as this time, but to reach that many by letter is already amazing.” Chu Beijie held on the endlessly wriggling Changxiao, saying to Pingting, “Let’s go see them together. These were all my former subordinates and retired for all sorts of reasons. Every one of them has a forte of their own.”

Pingting said, “It’s said that all people with skills are living in seclusion now. To be summoned by Duke’s letter at the final moment must mean that they are all very talented.” She took over Changxiao, putting him on the ground. She then patted his round head, “Be good, Changxiao. Go find Ze Qing to play.”

Changxiao was happy as he skipped away from the tent.

Chu Beijie was a little worried though. “How will he know where Ze Qing is? This place is a mess.”

“Yangfeng’s tent is right next door. Don’t worry, he’ll definitely find it.”

The remaining three had even more important matters to attend to. They couldn’t always think about the children. They immediately went to see the latest arrivals. They really were the talent amongst soldiers. Some of them were very good at setting up devices in the mountains and forests while others specialised in ambush or assassination.

When Chu Beijie led these soldiers, he highly valued these people. The summoned not only hate those who specialised in fighting on the frontlines but also those who specialised in healing cuts from swords.

“Although genius Doctor Huo’s medical skills are excellent, he tends to noble families so his treatment is detailed and thorough. There are lots of casualties in war so time is urgent, and the most important thing is speed. When it comes to speed, only the doctors who specialise in military treatment is the best.”

Under Chu Beijie’s introductions, Pingting met each one of them before hurried into the military conference.

Once entering the tent, they realised all of the generals had arrived, appearing to be waiting for them.

Chu Beijie was full of joy, having held his son in the morning and Pingting at hand. His face was like the spring breeze. He smiled quite refreshingly when entering, “Bei Mo’s new soldiers arrived yesterday. On Dong Lin’s side, my former subordinates have arrived this morning. With just another two or three days of preparation, we can follow our previously thought up strategy and sneak into Yun Chang, taking the initiative. What do you all think?” The others’ expressions weren’t as good as Chu Beijie, causing the smile on his face to freeze. “What’s wrong?”

There was a moment of silence in the tent before Ruohan said, “Please look at this latest report, Duke.” He took out the report and handed it to Chu Beijie.

One of the rules in the army said stated a report with urgent content must to be written with vermilion for the receiving generals to be able to immediately glance and understand the important message.

Chu Beijie took and opened it. The first line that jumped into his sight was a line written in vermilion—The Royal House of Gui Le was killed by He Xia...”

Pingting was standing beside Chu Beijie. Her thick eyelashes jumped, and her expression immediately changed when glimpsing the line of vermilion words.

The entire Royal House of Gui Le?

That didn’t mean just He Su but also the Queen and their underaged son.

The one who held the sword was He Xia, the descendant of the House of Jing-An, the House of Jing-An that loyally protected the Gui Le Royal House for centuries

It was her Master...

The words in the army report began to quiver. Pingting could barely breathe. She suddenly felt a warmth on her shoulder as Chu Beijie steadied her.

Everyone there knew Gui Le was still her home country. Even though the King of Gui Le wasn't kind to her, they still grew up together, so her sorrow couldn't be helped.

Chu Beijie helped her to a chair, wanting her to sit down. He softly asked, "Are you okay?"

The Queen of Dong Lin walked over, "This place is too stuffy with all the hurt. I'll accompany you with a walk outside and see where Changxiao has gone."

Pingting calmed down, looking at her surroundings in the tent. She saw everyone's face had a faint trace of concern, but this made her calm down instead. She slowly said, "I'm fine; sitting is good. The military affairs are urgent, so you mustn't delay."

Chu Beijie answered before continuing to read the rest of the report. The rest was quite eloquent; more than a hundred words to describe the detailed information the spies found. He then placed the report on the table, lightly asking, "What do Generals think?"

Luoshang spoke everyone's biggest concern. "Gui Le has already fallen. Le Zhen has been completely annihilated by Fei Zhaoxing. Now, the final power of the four countries that could possibly oppose He Xia has been eradicated."

"Next, He Xia would put full strength into attacking us." Ruohan's voice was heavy.

It was impossible not to feel heavy.

Once the Gui Le army was defeated, the four countries had already fallen into He Xia's hands.

Against the He Xia who obtained the strength of all four countries, this mere little Ting Army could pretty much be described as wasteful effort.

The generals in the tent were all lead commanders of their armies. They were able to face enemies alone, skilled in analysing the opposing situation. They didn't actually want to agree, but no matter how they analysed the situation, ninety to eighty percent of everything was favourable towards He Xia.

Their enemy was just too strong.

Chu Beijie's fingers tapped on the table while he quietly listened.

A little while later, all had been said. The crowd stopped, and silence instantly filled the room except for an messy rhythm tapping sound on the table.

Tap, tap, tap, tap...

Everyone stared at Chu Beijie's figure which looked as steady as a rock. It seemed that nothing in the world could make that broad back bend. They silently waited. The more the silence increased, the sense of steadiness increased too. Coupled with a never to be defeated attitude, there was a hidden rhythm that spread inside the tent.

The generals couldn't help close their mouths tightly. They knew Chu Beijie was thinking.

Tap.

The tapping sound against the table suddenly stopped.

For some reason, everyone's thumping heart also managed to relax.

Chu Beijie turned. The group guessed he was about to say something about his plan and waited in anticipation. They didn't expect him to have his gaze fixed on Pingting. He asked, "Will He Xia immediately leave Gui Le and put full effort into eradicating us?"

This question was beyond everyone's expectations.

Suddenly all gazes swivelled towards the sitting Pingting.

Pingting quietly sat for a few moments, a little colour had returned to her face. She gracefully stood up, glancing at the opened army report on the table, the vermillion words jumping right out. It felt like her heart had been pricked by a thin needle. She slightly frowned, whispering, "No."

This was different to everyone else's guess.

There was a seriousness to cheer tone, and no one doubted that she was saying nonsense. After everyone had exchanged gazes, the Queen of Dong Lin opened her mouth to ask, "How does Pingting know?"

A rough hand reached out, tightly holding Pingting's hand. Pingting raised her head, giving Chu Beijie a profound look. She turned towards the Queen of Dong Lin, "Does Queen know why He Xia is using such unscrupulous methods obtain the world?"

"For power and fame."

Pingting tightly pursed her lips, revealing a wry smile. "For the House of Jing-An."

The House of Jing-An.

Their Residence of Jing-An could please others, from their songs all night to their cold breezes.

The ponds had been quiet, greeting the wind. The bright but not extravagant Residence of Jing-An had gone up in flames overnight.

"Now that the Gui Le army has been annihilated, there will never be anyone else with the power to threaten He Xia's authority." Pingting continued, "Now that he single-handedly ruined the four countries, what else does he wish for? The House of Jing-An will once again raise He Xia's lofty ambitions so he will definitely try to quickly raise the House of Jing-An to an unimaginable height of glory."

"Miss means...He Xia will leave Gui Le and rebuild the House of Jing-An?" Moran frowned as he thought. "But the Marquess' personality wouldn't do something so time-consuming when he knows that he is still in threat from the Duke."

Chu Beijie revealed a pleased smile, "Moran, listen properly. Did Pingting not say the four words, 'unimaginable height of glory'?"

"I understand!" The light of understanding lit up in Luoshang's mind. He began to yelp, "He Xia wants to immediately ascend the throne! He wants to establish a new country and become King so the House of Jing-An can be raised to the unimaginable height of glory."

Ruohan also thumped against the armrest, exclaiming, "Once hierarchies are set, He Xia would officially control the world, making the rebellious parties of peasants much weaker."

"And then he'll put that brain of his to use, making gentle policies that will calm everyone down..."

"And finally, he would take his time and get rid of us."

"It'll be even easier to get rid of us by then."

Although they started off thinking the situation was urgent, this line of thinking hadn't changed anything at all. No matter how they looked at it, it seemed that they were trapped like a turtle in an urn.

Everyone's expressions darkened once more.

Moran thought for a moment. He then looked at Chu Beijie. "So, please Duke, decided what to do next."

Chu Beijie smiled slightly. Pingting saw he was about to speak. She shook her head, "No more testing me. The main advisor is Duke."

Chu Beijie was afraid she was upset over the army report and wanted to tease her a bit so she could more or less forget it. But after hearing her words, he couldn't make her take the glory again so he lowered his voice, "Duchess wants to see her husband make the instructions? I'll obey that then." His gaze shifted, scanning each of the audience in the tent.

Everyone knew he was about to decide on the plan. They paid closer attention, holding their breaths to listen quietly.

"The Gui Le army fell too quickly, leaving us very little time. No need to do intense preparation any more, Moran and I will lead one thousand of the best soldiers to sneak into Yun Chang, capturing Qierou."

Luoshang accompanied Chu Beijie for many years and naturally thought he would be amongst the ones to sneak into Qierou, but he hadn't heard his name. His expression suddenly changed. He almost jumped right out of his chair, "Duke, I.."

"Don't worry, you have another task."

Luoshang managed to settle and sat back down.

"It isn't easy to establish a new country, so He Xia will definitely find a feng shui consultant to carefully choose an auspicious day, so the event will be peacefully accepted by all. He will pick an auspicious day, so we will help him create some unluckiness to lower his morale." Chu Beijie then picked, "Ruohan, Luoshang, Hua Can, and twenty or so veterans who arrived today were all my former subordinates, each skilled in their own way. Take a few of them each, as well as a few capable soldiers from the various regiments, forming little squads that will each enter different places.

Ruohan managed to understand better than most, asking, "You want us to create unlucky incidents everywhere, to create panic amongst the peasants, right?"

Chu Beijie nodded, asking, "These are all the skill of lying, different from the battlefield. Since there are Yun Chang soldiers everywhere nowadays, be careful, Ruohan. Hiding your traces is the most important; don't let others find you. It's up to you in how you would create the unlucky incidents, but can you do it?"

Ruohan hadn't replied yet when a voice cut through.

"Mud oozing blood, swallows dropping dead for no reason, statues crying, that kind of thing right?"

Chu Beijie's glaze flickered, realising that it was Hua Can. He smiled at him, "I hadn't expected General Hua to be such an expert. Correct, things like that."

"These things aren't difficult to do at all." Hua Can frowned, "But even if we use a lot of effort to unsettle the peasants, these things are irrelevant to He Xia with his hundreds of thousands of soldiers. It just isn't practical."

Of course playing around as havoc-causing ghosts wasn't as stimulating as going to Qierou. Luoshang was also grouching over it too. But hearing the discontent Hua Can had towards Chu Beijie, Luoshang immediately retorted, "How does General Hua know that it isn't practical at all? You ought to know when attacking the enemy, attacking the heart is most important..."

Chu Beijie raised a hand, preventing Luoshang from continuing to speak. He turned to Hua Can, "You'll understand what use it is in the future." He didn't expand further on the question, just continued to assign everyone, "The rest of the people will stay in the main camp with Sister-in-Law in charge. You are to hide deep in the mountains, patiently waiting for news." He turned to the Queen of Dong Lin, showing a sign of submission. He lowered his voice, "I'll leave the rest to you, Sister-in-Law. If the enemy does get closer, make sure to hide. Don't try to forcefully take them on."

Ever since the Queen of Dong Lin took charge of Dong Lin's royal authority, she encountered several dangerous moments, so many that she wasn't the woman who only knew how to hide deep in the Royal Residence long ago. She didn't decline after listening to Chu Beijie's words. She slowly nodded, "Don't worry, I definitely won't try to be brave and solve everything the steadiest way possible. I'll look after this place, waiting for all of you to return."

"Then I can be rest assured."

Chu Beijie had managed to lay out a three-way plan in just a few direct addresses. It seemed the current strategy was set. Everyone there were people who fought in wars and were quite tired of this place, so they were dying to do something soon. Moran stood up, saying, "As we're going to Qierou, I'll go make some preparations. As for the people to take, I will go pick one thousand five hundred elite soldiers, and Duke can pick one thousand from them. Does that sound good?"

Chu Beijie said, "No need for that much work. I believe in your taste. You can pick all of the people that come with us. Order them to immediately put on some lightweight clothes and prepare to hit the road."

Luoshang also stood up. He stretched, loosening his tense muscles as he said, "Our side will split into three squads, but we will still need to carefully discuss about which countries to infiltrate and what action to take. General Ruohan, General Huacan, come, let us find a place to discuss."

The generals quickly left. The Queen of Dong Lin then stood too, "With the Duke of Zhen-Bei's instructions to look after the camp, I will now go inspect it." She took two steps, suddenly stopping. She turned to ask Pingting, "About that child Zuiju, I remember she got into an incident in Yun Chang, correct?"

Pingting hadn't been ready for her sudden question about Zuiju. Her heart stung a little as she softly replied, "The Songsen Mountains on the border of Yun Chang and Bei Mo..."

"Hm..." The Queen of Dong Lin nodded. She then wondered aloud, "About the Duke of Zhen-Bei's trip to Qierou, see if you can bring along genius Doctor Huo. He keeps on wanting to go to Yun Chang, but since I was worried about him, I used my illness as an excuse several times to discourage him. But looking at him, he will go sooner or later. I'm a bit more reassured if he's with you."

Chu Beijie and Pingting exchanged a look.

This trip of Chu Beijie to Qierou was an infiltration in enemy territory. It was really much more dangerous than Huo Yunan trying to find Zuiju alone. There was no way Pingting could let him get hurt as he was Zuiju's Teacher.

Pingting said, "Zuiju's body isn't actually in Yun Chang. While I was living in seclusion, I buried her inside Bei Mo territory."

"You mustn't let him see Zuiju's body. He won't take it, being an old man." The Queen of Dong Lin sighed, "Sigh, you're still young so you won't understand. Old people aren't able to take such a shock. If he sees a grave, it'll be disastrous. I just want you to take him around a bit and let the past fade for him a bit." As she said these words, she couldn't help think of her dead sons. The corners of her eyes began to redden, but she held it, refusing to cry.

Chu Beijie couldn't refuse after that. He answered, "Rest assured, Sister-in-Law. If genius Doctor Huo is coming, then I will properly look after him on the way.

He then sent the Queen off. After returning to the tent, he realised Pingting was still standing in the same place. Even though he'd seen fresh blood dripping and was a general who killed numerous enemies, he was terribly afraid of seeing his own woman upset.

Pingting returned to his side after two years. Chu Beijie always felt like she was a glass doll that could shatter at any time, and as long as her face showed depression, he just wouldn't stop worrying. He softly made his way beside Pingting, softening his voice, "What are you thinking? Why don't you go find Changxiao?"

Pingting knew he was afraid she was upset about Zuiju. She raised her head to look at him, revealing a shallow smile. "The arrangements Duke made today were all based on He Xia immediately ascending to the throne after establishing a new country. What if Pingting was wrong and He Xia didn't focus all his power on establishing a new country but immediately send troops to Dong Lin to attack us instead, causing disaster?"

"How can Pingting guess wrong? You know He Xia the best."

Pingting softly sighed in relief.

Chu Beijie asked, "What's wrong? Pingting isn't confident enough about herself? But I completely believe you."

"I thought I knew him best too. If I didn't get one hundred percent correct about what he was going to do, I would get at least seventy or eighty percent." Pingting's gaze drifted, stopping on that army report. She sighed, "But I had never guessed he would kill not only He Su but He Su's Queen and underaged son. There isn't much I can say, even though Prince He Su grew up with us too. Hatred had been created by the House of Jing-An's destruction after all. But the Prince is only a few years old. When he was born, we were all invited to celebrate with alcohol. Master had given him a jade bracelet, using gold thread to hang it around his neck..."

Chu Beijie didn't wait for her to finish, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her eyelid over and over again, murmuring, "Don't say any more, you'll get really upset if you do. If you're upset, I'm upset too. Do you not want me to sleep, even though I'm going to depart for Qierou soon?"

Pingting's cheeks flushed red from his kisses. She squirmed away, "I won't be able to sleep either with all your annoyances every day. Hm, if we're both going, should we bring Changxiao?"

Chu Beijie seemed to be dazed for a moment. "You're going too?"

"I'm not?"

Chu Beijie said, "It's too dangerous; don't come." His eyebrows furrowed, his handsome features revealing quite a lot more gloom

Pingting wasn't scared of his expression at all, leaning against his shoulders instead. She asked, "Duke doesn't want to let Pingting stay by his side?"

These words gently moved Chu Beijie. Quite a lot of people tried to suck up to him like this, but it just seemed that he was utterly defenceless against this one Pingting. His eyebrows knotted, his voice no longer as loud as before, "Of course not."

"Does Duke not worry that if he leaves Pingting here, his wife will be gone when he returns? The world is so vast, Pingting really wants to bring along Changxiao to travel to every place at least once."

Chu Beijie grabbed onto her, his hands digging into her armpit. "Outrageous, how dare you threaten me again. It actually became a habit too."

Pingting chortled, ducking beneath Chu Beijie's hands, trying to escape. "I don't dare, don't dare to. If Duke wants Pingting to stay, Pingting will just obey."

Chu Beijie hadn't expected she would be so open. He pulled her towards him, carefully tidying the tousled hair on her forehead. "I'm going to go so let's go see Changxiao."

"He's definitely playing with Ze Qing."

The two went to see Changxiao. As expected, beside Yangfeng, he was happily playing with Ze Qing. Seeing Chu Beijie, both came forward to pull the Divine Spirit sword from his waist. Thinking how he was going to leave his son, he held up Changxiao, kissing and pinching him. After a long time, he reluctantly settled his wriggling son down who wanted to go play. There was no way Changxiao knew his father's thoughts, and once he was on the ground, he giggled and ran off to play with Ze Qing again.

After an hour, Moran finished preparing everything. He came forwards to report, "The men have been chosen, just waiting for Duke's command."

Chu Beijie nodded, considering his options for a few moments. He said to Moran, "Pick a young good horse too, for Pingting."

Moran answered, immediately going off to arrange it.

Pingting waited until Moran left before smiling as she looked at Chu Beijie. "Hadh't you already subdued your enemy already? You subdued me into agreeing not to go already, so why go choose a horse? You really were afraid of me taking Changxiao away."

Chu Beijie was so annoyed he clenched his teeth. He grabbed her hand, pulling her into his arms. "You're not to go anywhere. I'll lock you up myself."

He had been teased by her to the pits of desperation in the past two years. He thought again and again, deciding to take Pingting with him in the end. Although it was a bit dangerous, he would at least be able to protect her if anything happened.

He crazily searched for her in the Songsen Mountains, breaching four of Yun Chang's checkpoints one after the other. That would be called torture.

"What about Changxiao?"

Chu Beijie bitterly endured and almost lost himself to his father's heart. A while passed before he clenched his teeth, "For now, leave him to Yangfeng. As long as I keep a close eye on the mother, I won't have to fear about losing my son."

Although Pingting wasn't willing to leave Changxiao to Yangfeng, she was assured. She nodded in agreement, stretched out, and promptly fell into Chu Beijie's arms, not moving at all.

Chu Beijie hadn't been able to do anything about her from the start, but when he looked down, seeing this precious treasure so gently elegant, he thought taking Pingting along was a good thing. He lowered his head to study her black hair and was just about to pull down a hairpin, having a few moments of that gentleness, when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. He forced himself to abruptly stop his hand.

Someone lifted the flap and entered, Moran again. He reported to Chu Beijie, "Miss Bai's horse has been chosen."

Pingting had already opened her eyes before Moran entered. She struggled out of Chu Beijie's arms, quickly fixing up her appearance at one side.

"To avoid the Yun Chang army noticing anything strange, it's best to move at night. Pass along this Order, cook dinner early tonight and set off after eating."

In the gatherings of dust, an inconspicuous-looking team set off from the forest.

They went through the mountains, heading straight towards Qierou.

The modest little town of Yun Chang quietly stood in its place. It seemed to have no clue that the change of the world was just beginning.

When the first hooves sounds of Chu Beijie's and his beloved wife's sounded the expedition, everything had been decided—in the glorious opening chapter of the Ting courts, the name Qierou would forever be remembered.

## Chapter 69

Bathed in brilliant morning light, Fei Zhaoxing lead the triumphant troops on their march on a flat road. In the distance, they could see the gates to the capital of Gui Le.

The remnants of the Gui Le army had been fully wiped out. In the two boxes close to his reach, they respectively held the heads of Le Di and Le Zhen.

The father and son were once his masters. He followed, risked his life, and sweated for them until they finally tried to do him in like stewing the hounds after all the hares were killed or the setting aside the bow when all the birds were shot.

Unsatisfied! He was unsatisfied!

This dissatisfaction caused him to choose betrayal without further thoughts, and the very same betrayal gave him achievements.

Wuu...wuu... The ancient horn blew out another long, deep sound, welcoming their arrival.



The gates were opened. Fei Zhaoxing surged into the Gui Le capital with his soldiers, amongst the calls of the horn.

Gui Le no longer existed. He Su died, the Royal House destroyed.

On the sides of the pathway were peasants kneeling down in greeting. These people of a fallen country were obviously forced out of their homes to hurry over by the soldiers. They trembled as they knelt, their gazes perhaps both angry and afraid. They tried to hide, trying not to let their piercing expressions rest on the soldiers.

These gazes couldn't be called good, but they did nothing to weaken Fei Zhaoxing's excitement and pride.

He didn't need to care. These peasants were humbly kneeling. They knew He Su was an incompetent coward. They didn't know as royalty, one must be decisive, heartless and vicious.

And who was better than He Xia, the romantic Marquess of Jing-An with great swordsmanship and looks?

The bystanders understood.

Fei Zhaoxing knew better than He Xia. Yaotian was a difficult checkpoint for He Xia.

When Yaotian took her last breath in the Yun Chang Royal Residence, nothing could bound He Xia, nonstop.

This made Fei Zhaoxing very happy. Life was a gamble to him. It was necessary to have insight to win. Fei Zhaoxing was wrong to follow Le Zhen, but this time he finally managed to beat on the right treasure.

He picked He Xia and obtained a golden opportunity.

After trotting past the kneeling peasants of the fallen country, the more he went inside, the more he realised how deserted the streets were. Occasionally he would see unsettled expressions, but under the cold glint of the Yun Chang soldiers in the sunlight, all of their expressions seemed to become statue-like indifference.

One of He Xia's trusted guards was waiting on the road. He was high-spirited as he spoke to Fei Zhaoxing who was about to head for the Royal Residence, "The Marquess of Jing-An isn't at the Royal Residence. General Fei, please go to the Jing-An Ducal Residence."

Fei Zhaoxing nodded, gathered his reins, and turned. The Jing-An Ducal Residence was He Xia's previous home so waiting there was very normal too.

He dismounted at the Jing-An Ducal Residence. The scene he saw was devastating. He was stunned for a moment before following the guard and stepping across the tall threshold.

The Residence had green moss everywhere and overgrown grass.

Across the carved columns charred by fire in the distance, He Xia was standing alone in this patch of barren solitude.

This lonely figure was about to have every river and mountain for eternities, and his name would be forever remembered.

Fei Zhaoxing didn't dare drop his guard. He walked over and stood there, respectfully saying, "Report to Marquess of Jing-An, I have already brought Le Di and Le Zhen's heads."

He Xia knew he arrived a while ago. He turned and assessed him with a glance, smiling, "Good job. You've done well and I have already prepared your reward. Come, read it."

A bodyguard came forward, opened up a scroll, and began to read aloud. The rewards were, as expected, abundant. Fei Zhaoxing used to follow Le Zhen hence he visited the Gui Le Royal Residence quite often even from his early years. The rewards included several prized treasures that even the King of Gui Le couldn't bear to give away.

He Xia picked the main seat. His expression was faint. It seemed as if he was smiling, but the laughter in his eyes wasn't very strong, so it was difficult to determine. Fei Zhaoxing waited until the guard finished reading and bowed to thank for his rewards. "I have only fought a shameless battle thanks to Marquess of Jing-An's blessings. I don't dare accept so many rewards." He then carefully asked, "Marquess of Jing-An has not yet seen Le Di and Le Zhen's head, perhaps..."

"No need." He Xia shook his head, "Why won't I trust you?"

Two glamorous maids brought forth hot tea, serving He Xia and Fei Zhaoxing. Fei Zhaoxing thanked He Xia and took the cup with both hands. The cup shone brilliantly. It was easy to tell it was a rare treasure. In this deserted Ducal Residence, it looked very out of place.

He Xia seemed to see what he was thinking. He took a sip of the hot tea, "I once instructed this place to be decorated in coloured silk, filled with fine furniture, but it did nothing to bring back a tiniest glimmer of life. I also ordered someone to repair the ruined walls, but once they started, I ordered them to stop. Do you know why?"

Fei Zhaoxing placed the tea down and sat up straighter before cautiously reply, "The Jing-An Ducal Residence of the past will always be the Jing-An Ducal Residence of the past. No matter how much it is rebuilt, the past can never come back."

He Xia's thin lips moved slightly as if wanting to twitch into a smile, but it soon faded. "That's right. What is lost will always be lost. Why is it that when people make their choices, they can never remember this? I really regret it."

Between his words, there was actually an extremely faint expression of pain.

Fei Zhaoxing hadn't thought He Xia would suddenly speak these words that dug at the heart. He was flattered by his trust but didn't dare answer.

In his heart, He Xia was a man with a rare type of dignity. This kind of person was emotional but hid them well in the depths of their mind as they were afraid of others knowing them.

Fei Zhaoxing lowered his head and raised his cup once more. He took a small sip as if trying to soothe his throat.

"I murdered He Su's entire family." He Xia suddenly asked, "Do you know the outside gossip yet?"

Fei Zhaoxing nodded, "I've heard about it as well as those other gossips too."

"What do you think?"

"The members of the Royal House from a fallen country are no more than ants. The Marquess of Jing-An has conquered the world, so what is killing a few ants in comparison?"

"I don't need to deceive you." He Xia looked at him in the eye before faintly smiling, "The outside rumours aren't quite wrong. He Su and the Queen didn't actually try to assassinate me after surrendering. I killed their family of three without reason." Fei Zhaoxing was stunned, not knowing how to reply. He Xia changed the subject, "General Shang Lu is dead now, so who shall be in charge of the Yongchang Regiment?"

Fei Zhaoxing replied, "When the army lost their advisor, the situation was dire so the decision was made quickly. Currently I am in charge of them."

He Xia didn't particularly mind, "Dongzhuo is old enough. It's time to give him an experience to practice. The Yun Chang capital's situation has stabled now, so I am going to get him to go out on the battlefield to learn some skills. Leave the Yongchang Regiment to him and pass the message onto him when you leave."

Fei Zhangxing answered.

No one understood why but He Xia seemed to be more in thought than usual. He sighed, standing up from his chair to say, "Come, accompany me on a walk."

Fei Zhaoxing followed him, strolling around the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

The courtyard was completely abandoned, and the pond was full of duckweed. Occasionally there would be a few bubbles, causing a tiny current on the surface. They weren't from colourful carps but rather little gray-black wild fish that somehow mysteriously gotten into the pond.

The insects in the grass cried loudly.

They trampled over the tall grass, one after the other. He Xia walked for a long time before suddenly speaking, "I didn't expect that even Gui Le would fall so quickly." His voice held a lot of emotion.

Fei Zhaoxing speculated about him. He conquered the world, yet he was more upset than before.

He quietly looked at his back view, very straight and tight like a taut string.

Perhaps it was because there would never be anything that could compete against He Xia. His army's presence in this reunion with He Xia made Fei Zhaoxing feel that it was stranger than usual by ten times. His sense of supreme majesty had already started to flow out despite not ascending to the throne yet.

"The final army of Gui Le is now destroyed, so the four countries have already been conquered as one. I plan to issue a formal edict and in the name of the Marquess of Jing-An, establish a new country with the name Jing-An."

Fei Zhaoxing hesitated before tentatively advising, "Establishing the new country is very important, but the matters regarding Chu Beijie haven't been sorted. Shouldn't we..."

"No need to worry. Even if Chu Beijie has ten times his own ability, there is no way he can resist my army of several hundreds of thousands. What is there to fear about a barren general?" He Xia sneered, "When I ascend to the throne, my status is established. He will never be Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei but my Jing-An country's usurper. It'll be justified to kill him. Even though he isn't easy to get rid of, I'll have lots of time then so I'll deal with him slowly."

According to He Xia's thoughts, the four countries had already settled. There would never be any other opponent worth spending effort on and so he was a bit hesitant in killing Chu Beijie immediately. He rather slowly toyed him to death, like a cat scratching a mouse.

One couldn't say He Xia was arrogant. After all, in the four countries, all of the armies that opposed He Xia were destroyed. What could Chu Beijie do by himself in challenging the Yun Chang army?

If he dared to openly recruit rebels, the Yun Chang army would immediately arrive, fighting with ten times more. It would be impossible for Chu Beijie to escape death then.

Fei Zhaoxing's heart felt rather unsettled, but after hearing He Xia's relaxed tone, he realised he couldn't convince him. He just remained silent, nodding.

He Xia suddenly stopped. "There's one thing I need you to do."

"Yes."

"I want you to collect every country's treasures, pearls and precious stones. Find a group of craftsmen that studies jewels."

Fei Zhaoxing understood, asking, "To create the King's crown, correct?"

He Xia shook his head, raising two fingers. "Two. One is the King's crown, the other is the Queen's. Both must be exquisite to perfection, not a hint of error."

Fei Zhaoxing answered and left after receiving a few more instructions from He Xia.

After returning to the residence and making provisional arrangements, Fei Zhaoxing began to think. He kept thinking something was wrong and called for a confidant who was left guarding Gui Le. "Did the Marquess of Jing An meet a woman after returning to Gui Le?"

That confidant pondered carefully, shaking his head, "Didn't hear anything about him getting close to a woman. After arriving in Gui Le, he immediately went to deal with various matters near the Jing-An Ducal Residence. It's not strange though. It's inevitable, wanting to pay tribute to dead relatives when seeing former homes."

Fei Zhaoxing felt there was a lump in his throat, but he couldn't think of what to say. He just felt like he was missing something. While he was thinking, another subordinate came to report the items He Xia rewarded him had arrived at his door.

Fei Zhaoxing personally went to pick them up. When he opened one of the boxes, he realised all of them were extremely rare. It seemed He Xia rewarded generously and would by no means be a stingy king in the future.

Fei Zhaoxing was secretly pleased and rewarded the deliverers a handsome sum. He Xia's bodyguard Toumu had also come, grinning while congratulating Fei Zhaoxing. "I have been ordered to come here for another reason too. It's about General Dongzhuo being in charge of the Yongchang Regiment; please, General Fei, use the military stamp and pass on the rights clearly."

Fei Zhaoxing knew about this already. He cheerfully took the document over and stamped it to exchange rights to the Yongchang Regiment. He then sent away the soldiers who'd gotten quite a bit of reward.

Because of his secret delight, although it was just the end of a long journey, Fei Zhaoxing couldn't sleep early. He summoned a few of his subordinate generals to drink with him to celebrate.

"Come on, cheers! This cup is dedicated to our general who is slowly rising through the ranks with immeasurable potential for the future. It's also dedicated to our Prince Consort so that he may ascend to the throne soon!"

One of the lieutenants hurriedly urged, "Don't mention the title, the Prince Consort. The orders from above say that from now on, we must address him as the Marquess of Jing-An. General Zhang, you'd better be careful not to break the rules."

"Heh, I am a man who fights on the battlefield. No way am I gonna care about rules. Cheers!" That lieutenant was still about to persuade him when General Zhang suddenly waved his hands, impatiently shouting, "I know, I know. The Marquess of Jing-An won't be called that for much longer either, but the Emperor. I heard those civil service workers are claiming to be officials too."

The generals were all strictly forbidden from alcohol on the battlefield. From their long abstinence, they greedily and happily drank several pots. Fei Zhaoxing stumbled in his haze and was somehow supported back to his bed.

His sleep was dreamy when there was a sudden jolt of cold for some reason, causing him to sober.

Suddenly opening his eyes, Fei Zhaoxing stiffly sat up from his bed. His heart hammered non-stop, feeling uneasy as if trying to jump out.

There had to be something wrong.

He had a strange sort of trust in his own intuition.

He felt a sudden unrest in his heart when Le Zhen prepared to murder him last time. He bolted out of the city at night to escape. His heart was now trembling. He couldn't help but be careful. He repeated the conversation he had with He Xia over and over again, thinking about it again and again but couldn't find anything strange.

He had done everything He Xia wanted him to do. He had not only ruined the Dong Lin army but killed Le Di and Le Zhen as well as deal with Shang Lu. How could he do any better than this?

If it was about how he was usually a little too greedy about gold and jewelry, He Xia should've had an idea about it earlier and wouldn't do harm to him for such an insignificant reason.

What on earth went wrong?

Could it be another stewing for the hounds once all the hares were killed, or the setting aside the bow when all the birds are shot-like action? Fei Zhaoxing stiffened but then shook his head.

No, no, He Xia wasn't Le Di, wasn't Le Zhen. He was the Marquess of Jing-An, ingenious and tolerant.

After the war finished, the new country would be established. It wouldn't be strange if he wasn't as courteous as before. But as long as he was willing to share a little bit of his great wealth, Fei Zhaoxing was all right.

He tried to think but couldn't think of anything before finally dozing off.

But from thereon, he really did become a bit more careful and a lot more cautious.

Moving rapidly, Chu Beijie and his men headed for Qierou. At first he was a bit afraid the road would be exhausting, and Pingting wouldn't be able to take it.

But Pingting was also someone who often accompanied on the army's expeditions both near and far, so Chu Beijie's worry was quickly dissolved, whole-heartedly dedicating himself to hurrying along.

The ten thousand elite soldiers disbanded at the borders to sneak into Yun Chang territory and quietly met in the outer suburbs of Qierou.

These people were all veterans refined by massive battles. Each, handpicked by Moran and instructed over and over again, were as slippery as ghosts, not making the slightest error.

Not a single alarm sounded by the time a thousand people snuck into Qierou. The Yun Chang army had no idea an entire enemy regiment had gotten so close. The people of Qierou city knew nothing of this impending disaster.

And Fanlu didn't know he had become the target of the Duke of Zhen-Bei either.

This Governor of Qierou was currently pained over something completely irrelevant to Chu Beijie.

“They just want to force me to die! Fine, come on! Being in the army for so long, there’s absolutely nothing I can’t overcome!” The documents that just arrived was crushed to balls by Fanlu and mercilessly thrown onto the ground. The Governor’s voice could be heard throughout the residence as he yelled, “How do I know where those two Sirs went? So many people witnessed them leaving Qierou, not to mention they often left flexibly. Maybe they crossed the borders long ago too. What’s the point of sending me documents asking me to find them when they’re already gone? To hell with this!”

The messenger in charge had long been scared away, only leaving Clerk Dujing. He frowned as he watched Fanlu, who appeared to have been stabbed on her behind, as he angrily paced up and down the room.

The Governor’s fury was really quite something today.

“Sir, please calm down. Although this document is unreasonable, it still the higher-up’s wishes so we can’t just ignore it. This...”

“I know we can’t just ignore it.” Fanlu continued to rage for a few moments, venting out until his anger calmed. His body then seemed to relax. He shockingly began to laugh. His toe touched the rolling balls of documents when he suddenly added power, kicking it right into the corner.

He swaggered to a seat in his chair before nonchalantly propping his legs onto the table. “Hm, then we’ll track them down. Clerk, for the Qierou city bulletin board, put up paintings of the two p...no, the two Sirs. Make sure to draw realistically and write...” He chewed on an end of a brush in his mouth, ambiguously instructing, “Two officials have been lost hence the Governor is looking for them. If alive, bring persons; if dead, bring corpses to me. The discoverer will be rewarded one hundred silver coins if alive and two hundred silver coins if dead. Just do that.”

From his tone, Dujing could tell Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng annoyed him greatly, but he wasn’t too sure whether he was joking or not. He was almost in tears as he said, “Sir, I’m afraid one hundred silver coins is a bit too little if they are alive. Hm, as for dead, it’s better not to add too much.”

“Ok, ok, it’s up to you.” Fanlu waved his hand and sneezed, “Today’s formal work has been done. Go post on the bulletin board soon; I have to get some rest.”

After turning at the backyard, he grabbed onto Zuiju’s wrist, heading straight out of the door.

Zuiju let herself be pulled. She was rather dumbfounded, “What’s wrong now? You ought to look at the fleeing-like expression of yours.”

“It’s a good day. Accompany me on a relaxation trip.”

At these words, Zuiju stopped moving. She tried to pull her wrist away, “Let go, my little plants still haven’t been watered. Why would I let them wither just because Sir wants to have some relaxation time?”

Fanlu refused to release her wrist, not loosening in the slightest. He turned back to look at her, “A document has arrived today. Big news, Sir Pu Guang and Pu Sheng have both disappeared and the higher-ups want me to track them down. Hey, are you going to accompany me?”

Zuiju was taken aback, and she looked around.

No one knew better than these two about the deaths of Pu Guang and Pu Sheng.

After He Xia obtained power, Yun Chang pulled out a bunch of heavy punishments, causing panic everywhere. Zuiju reckoned she need to find a place and carefully discuss the matter with Fanlu. While she hesitated for a few moments as she processed the thought of Fanlu not calling her out for that, he pulled her away, leaving the residence gates carefree.

Although Qierou was a small city, the streets were still quite lively. Fanlu left wearing civilian clothes while Zuiju never particularly liked wearing refined clothes, so the two didn't catch any attention as they took the road.

"Want some Tanhulu?"

"One bowl of soybean curd then?"

Fanlu stopped often from his walk. When he saw something he liked, he'd rummage for some money, buy it and give it to Zuiju. Zuiju would vigorously shake her head, indicating she didn't want it. Fanlu would then give it to some random child on the streets. In the end, Zuiju couldn't help but accept a small doll from him.

Even after walking for the entire afternoon, Fanlu didn't say a single useful thing. He obviously didn't plan to mention Pu Guang and Pu Sheng.

Holding onto the doll, Zuiju couldn't help saying, "Hey, speak."

"Speak about what?"

"What should we do? Leave the city?"

Fanlu turned around and studied her. He mused, "You really thought we were escaping?"

From his expression, Zuiju could tell he wasn't lying, but then again, his words could never be trusted. She lowered her voice, persisting, "Then why'd you take me out? Didn't those documents tell you to track them down? If the truth gets out, you can't be saved from the fate of execution even if you had a hundred heads."

"I told you earlier. You're accompanying me on a relaxation trip. You really have a guilty conscience, forcibly linking everything to escaping." Fanlu pulled a face before beckoning the city gates with his chin. "I started tracking them down ages ago. Can't you see that announcement?"

When it came to important matters, Zuiju took them a hundred times more seriously. Hearing how he'd put up an announcement, she immediately wanted to check. She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the city gates without another word.

Fanlu was the one who usually grabbed her hand, so this was the first time Zuiju grabbed onto Fanlu first.

She didn't do it on purpose. The touch of her soft hand made Fanlu's heart thump rapidly for several moments. He eyed Zuiju curiously, but Zuiju was wholeheartedly worrying so she didn't notice his glances.

Dujing wasn't one to stall his duties. The announcement was indeed posted onto the city gates. The people drawn on it looked quite vicious. Because Pu Guang and Pu Sheng were notorious, all of the peasants were rather calm after seeing the announcement, seeing potential gossip. Zuiju was mixed into the crowd as she read the announcement and relieved to find that it was just a normal tracking. She lowered her voice, "Did you write this?"

Fanlu harrumphed, cursing, "Damn, that bastard Dujing changed ma words. That clerk ain't good."

Zuiju was taken aback, "What did he change?"

“Originally I wrote ‘two pigs were lost’, but why’d it change to ‘two lost officials’ now?”

Zuiju chuckled, holding back her laughter as she glared at him, “What governor are you, always being unserious and trying to amuse others?”

Fanlu never admitted defeat when it came to playing with words, but he just grunted a bit, not retorting back. He simply said, “Now that you’ve seen the announcement, let’s go.”

The two people held hands as they turned back. Fanlu suddenly lowered his voice, “Are you afraid of seeing dead people?”

Zuiju frowned, “You’re going to kill again?”

She just casually asked this but didn’t expect that Fanlu would answer, “Yes.”

Zuiju’s heart fell and her grip tightened on Fanlu’s hand.

Fanlu’s voice was even lower than before as if the tiniest whisper. “A hardly noticeable person has been following us for a while now. Don’t be afraid, I’ll lead him to a dark alley and then, as if on the mountains to hunt, silently finish him off with a few shots like a rabbit.”

After a few turns, the bustling sounds of activity gradually decreased. The alleys became smaller and smaller as the two walked into it. The gap became incredibly small that not even the sun was fully capable of shining through.

The deeper inside, the darker it seemed.

Fanlu always had a wild personality in the army. Thanks to being a governor who read scrolls and scrolls of letters or documents, he dying for someone to be his target to have some fun. As a spy, he was exceptionally sensitive. He knew there was only one person following him so he chose a dead end without too much worry. When he saw the wall, he turned around, one hand holding Zuiju’s hand and the other taking out the light crossbow from behind his waist. After silently placing his bow on the string, he asked Zuiju, “Would you rather I shoot his neck or his heart?”

Zuiju watched the cold gleam of the arrow head. She shivered, “Don’t ask me.” She clutched onto Fanlu’s hand even tighter.

This made Fanlu even happier. His mouth lifted to a cold smile, “My friend who has been following us, do come out. Let us chat a bit.”

A figure moved in the corner not long after. A person slowly stepped out from there. He smiled, “I’m really delighted to see you. Why didn’t you send us a letter to tell us, didn’t you know how worried we were?” He spoke directly to Zuiju.

Zuiju’s eyes widened. She lost her voice, “Moran!”

Moran nodded, before his gaze finally flickered to Fanlu. His articulation was clear, “Governor, you’re lucky. If I hadn’t seen Zuiju beside you, I’m afraid you would’ve been decapitated already.”

Fanlu began to chuckle and turned to Zuiju. “I prefer the neck. Once the arrow hits, it’d immediately make him shut up.” He was about to lower his crossbow when he suddenly stiffened.

A sharp, icy cold sword had silently reached out and placed itself on his neck as if impartial to the situation.

A deep man’s voice began to laugh “I prefer the neck too.”



Fanlu was a bit conceited about his sharp senses, but he'd never been crept up from behind so quietly. He was shocked.

He specialised in probing the enemy in dept. Hearing the calm dignity in the voice of the man behind, Fanlu immediately knew this man was no ordinary expert. He good-graciously lowered his crossbow, forcing a laugh, "In the very end, I was the unfortunate rabbit after all."

Zuiju looked behind and was even more surprised. Her hands went to her mouth as she cried, "My god, it's the Duke..."

Chu Beijie was standing behind Fanlu and acknowledged Zuiju with a glance. "You really made Pingting upset for a long time."

"Miss Bai?" Zuiju's felt like her heart had been stimulated too many times and hurriedly clutched onto her chest. It felt like waves of fireworks began to filter out, so pretty that it made her want to cry. She took several deep breaths, before stuttering, "Miss Bai...she's still alive? That's great...that's great...the child? That child..."

"You can have a nice chat later. Look, my neck still has this thing on it," Fanlu cut off her words.

Zuiju was far too moved. She wiped away her tears with one hand while staring at him, "How can you boss me around at this time? Do you know who's behind you? Be careful or he'll budge that sword into your neck."

From their conversation, Fanlu already guessed he was the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Forget about other opponents. If it's the Duke of Zhen-Bei who'd placed the sword on his neck, then he wouldn't be able to escape even if he was ten times stronger. He was more flexible than most and decided the skies would collect his life when it was due. He stopped fearing, having a rather giddy expression instead. "You won't miss me?"

Zuiju was greatly embarrassed by his smile in front of Chu Beijie and Moran. She blushed, "You, you...you're always bullying me. I want the Duke to kill you for revenge!"

Fanlu was about to talk when his neck suddenly felt cold. The blade shifted slightly into his skin, causing a prickling pain.

"Kyaa!" Zuiju saw some blood trickling out from Fanlu's neck and was almost scared out of her wits. She gasped, "Duke, Duke, I'm just kidding, please don't..."

Moran had already guessed more or less about their relationship when he saw them. He threw Chu Beijie a questioning glance. Chu Beijie quietly nodded when Moran calmly said, "Flirting, fighting, and chatting can come later. Governor, we came here today because we'd like to discuss something with you."

Fanlu's mind worked fast. He Xia was currently at the height of his power. Why else would the Duke of Zhen-Bei suddenly appear in the tiny city of Qierou for? He replied, "The reason you're interested in me, despite having a lowly rank of a governor, is only because of the military resource supplies that pass by here. Because of Senior Official Gui, He Xia doesn't treat me as a human. Even little cats and dogs try to toy with me. I've had enough. In short, I don't mind surrendering the town to Duke of Zhen-Bei at all, but I have a condition."

Chu Beijie saw him reveal his intentions in one go, and his heart was slightly surprised. Why was such rare talent in the army assigned to the tiny town of Qierou? Chu Beijie watched him speak for a bit until he suddenly made a condition, but he already had the gist of it anyway. He loosened the sword slightly so it was no longer pressed against the skin. He beckoned at Moran.

Moran asked, "What condition?"

Fanlu thought for a bit and suddenly changed his mind. "Hm, wrong, my Qierou is a city in the end. It's not worthwhile to exchange for a single condition so I want two."

This was the first time Moran met such a cloven person so he was stunned.

Zuiju knew what he was like. She raised her head to look at the blood drops on his neck, secretly hating how he still dared to provoke Chu Beijie at such a time. She hurried said, "Can't you speak a bit less?" For some reason she didn't know her hands kept on shaking. Thinking that the Duke may let her off for Miss Bai, she gave Chu Beijie a pleading look, "Duke, his personality is just like that. Don't blame him."

Seeing her like that, Fanlu's heart felt sweeter than honey. He didn't care whether his life was at stake or not; he just roared in laughter.

Zuiju was both worried and angry. She pinched his hand, hard.

Chu Beijie indifferently observed the two people. He thought for a while before murmuring, "Say your two conditions."

Fanlu already knew Chu Beijie would accept it. He laughed, "First, I want Zuiju."

Zuiju softly gasped, her blush spreading past her ears. She didn't quite know whether to stand or to hide. She mumbled a curse, "How could you ask the Duke for me when I'm not a thing?"

Fanlu said, "I'm making my conditions to the Duke of Zhen-Bei. It's none of your business, is it?" That made Zuiju almost faint in anger.

Chu Beijie nodded. "I can promise this condition to you."

Fanlu then asked, "She isn't a thing. How could you promise that she'll be with me?"

"That's easy." Chu Beijie slowly said, "I'll ask her whether she agrees with my sword pointed at your fingers. For every disagreement she makes, I will cut off a finger. I assure you that she will agree before all ten are cut off."

Fanlu couldn't help be a bit shocked. He muttered, "Quite the brutal method."

The three men were quiet for a few moments before bursting into laughter. Chu Beijie took this gap to retrieve the sword from Fanlu's neck.

Zuiju was completely red from their laughter. She clenched her teeth, "Men aren't good; you're all in the same team." She then turned to Fanlu, ranting, "Even if all of your fingers and toes have been cut off, I won't bother paying attention. It's not like I'm a maid sold to the Duke, so none of you can do anything about me!"

Chu Beijie faintly replied, "Then just try it."

Zuiju was alarmed by this. She knew Chu Beijie's actions were always the same as his words. It wasn't like those fingers belonged to Chu Beijie so even if he did chop them off, what did he have to lose? Judging from Moran's earlier words, it seemed like they were planning to kill the Governor of Qierou at first.

Zuiju heard of nobles joking about killing people and was terribly afraid that she'd really cause harm to Fanlu. She didn't dare act stubborn, so she closed her mouth tightly, not saying any more.

“What’s the second condition?” Moran asked.

Fanlu laughed, “I haven’t thought of it yet. Is it fine to mention it in the future?”

Chu Beijie noted that this man was very flexible and alert as well as incredibly dedicated to Zuiju, making him very likeable. The corners of his mouth revealed a faint smile, “Fine.”

Fanlu asked, “How many people did the Duke of Zhen-Bei bring inside?”

“Only we two came inside.”

“Only two?”

Fanlu was secretly surprised. Chu Beijie was really courageous. If his identity was to get out, a whole city worth of soldiers would immediately be summoned. There was no chance of survival if surrounded.

Chu Beijie breezily mentioned, “Two is enough.”

Originally they only come in to check the situation. They hadn’t expected that right after slipping past the city guards, they’d see the Governor in civilian clothing. They were even more surprised to find the person accompanying him was the Zuiju who Pingting had been distraught about. There was no way Chu Beijie would let go of such a great chance.

The three people were in the army for a long time. They wasted no time, immediately making preparations for alliance. They planned to meet in the Governor Residence street in the evening.

As Chu Beijie was about to leave with Moran, Fanlu asked, “Aren’t you afraid of me taking the city back?”

Moran glanced at Zuiju, replying, “With Zuiju as a hostage, there’s no way you dare take it back.”

Fanlu’s expression suddenly changed. He sternly replied, “Don’t you dare think about taking her away.” He thought for a bit and a threatening smile floated onto his face, “The moment I lose sight of her is the moment I’ll declare you to the higher ups. If not, then you can kill me now.”

Seeing how nervous he was, Chu Beijie thought it rather amusing. He lowered his voice, “We won’t take her away. You can have Zuiju as a hostage while we’ll have her Teacher as a hostage. Both sides can be at ease.” Hearing someone else outside of the alley, he gave an alerting expression at Moran.

Time was running out. The two nodded at Fanlu and hurriedly disappeared without saying another word.

Fanlu stood on the spot, watching them go away.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei really deserved his reputation. At the very least, his assassination technique while remaining hidden was already something very few could match.

Apart from those stoic guards of monarchs, perhaps no one could not live in fear after dealing with Chu Beijie.

Fanlu’s arm was suddenly heavily shaken a few times. He turned around.

Zuiju was excited, her eyes large and round. “Did you hear that? It’s Teacher! Teacher has come too, ah...I didn’t hear that wrong right? I didn’t hear that wrong, right?” She took several deep breaths, her heart thudding in her chest. She sighed, “Oh god, all the good news has come today. Coming out for a relaxation trip was right. Miss Bai didn’t die, the Duke has come, Teacher has come too...” She rubbed her eyes and began to cry.

Fanlu was originally impatient, but once seeing her cry, he could only try to cheer her up. “Why are you crying again when you should laugh when you’re happy? It’s getting dark, let’s go back.”

Zuiju continued to sob lightly, shaking her head, “My heart’s too much of a mess, and my feet feel soft. Don’t worry about me.”

Fanlu began to chuckle, “I sold Qierou City for you; my heart’s even messier. But from now on, you’re mine. I’ll just be a bit unlucky and carry you back to the residence.”

At his mention, Zuiju couldn’t help give him another glance. She softly asked, “You allied yourself with a former enemy for me. Don’t you feel rather bad about it?”

Fanlu harrumphed, “The Royal House of Yun Chang has completely died and He Xia is planning to make a new country. No one can say I’m betraying my country. At most, I’m only betraying He Xia. What’s there to feel bad about?”

Chu Beijie received good news on his very first visit to Qierou, and he was delighted. When he returned to the temporary campsite beyond the Qierou suburbs, he instructed to Moran, “Don’t tell anyone about what happened today yet. I want to give Pingting a surprise.”

Moran said, “Genius Doctor Huo will be greatly surprised too.”

“Of course.”

The two finished discussing and entered the tent together. Everyone inside was waiting for their news. Pingting was worrying about Chu Beijie’s return after entering the city, but she instantly relaxed after seeing his figure. She stood up to welcome them back, “What’s the situation in Qierou? We’ve just discussed here, forming many different strategies, but each has a little flaw in them. It’s rather difficult not letting others notice this little city.” She picked up the recently written scroll on the table and handed it to Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie skimmed it before putting it down. A smile floated onto his face, “I thought of a better plan.”

He was the main advisor. His confidence meant he thought of a good plan. The crowd was delighted, collectively asking, “What plan does Duke have?”

“We shall formally enter the city and go meet the Governor according to the rules. Everyone will sit down and calmly talk out the conditions, convincing him to oppose He Xia.”

The crowd were waiting eagerly. Hearing Chu Beijie’s breezy words, they couldn’t help feel discouraged. They bitterly smiled, “Duke is joking with us.”

But Pingting deeply understood Chu Beijie would never joke about military affairs. She thought for a few moments, asking Chu Beijie, “Did Duke see the Governor of Qierou during the infiltration today? Was the general promoted by He Xia or raised by Gui Changqing?”

This question was to the point. Moran stood aside, loudly praising her.

If Fanlu hadn’t been on Gui Changqing’s faction and suffered immensely under He Xia’s faction, then even if he had Zuiju by his side, he may not have sold Qierou immediately after seeing Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie saw Pingting's black eyes were fixed on him. He couldn't help hold onto her little hand, quietly replying, "Pingting guessed correctly. I really want to give up my position as main advisor. Apart from that, there's another reason. Please guess, Pingting."

The crowd saw how close the two were. They didn't dare make a sound, just holding back their smiles as they watched.

Pingting lowered his voice, "If I had to guess more, then Duke probably attacked, letting the Governor know strong he is."

Moran applauded, "As expected of Miss Bai to guess even that. Duke's ability to assassinate is something that even the greatest generals of the four countries are terrified of."

Chu Beijie continued to smile, "Guess a little bit deeper."

Pingting frowned for a long time. She shook her head, "Can't guess any deeper; it's not like I'm a god."

"I'll give you a hint. I'm going to go in with genius Doctor Huo tonight."

Pingting mumbled "Oh" before asking, "The Governor of Qierou has someone he really cares about who is sick?"

If he had really been oppressed by the He Xia faction and threatened by Chu Beijie's action, not to mention an important family or friend being sick, agreeing to him wasn't entirely impossible.

Chu Beijie said, "Who doesn't have someone they really care about? The matter about Qierou has been sorted anyhow. The gods did a huge favour for us this time. Come with me tonight and you'll understand."

When night was about to fall, Chu Beijie really did lead Pingting to get Huo Yunan. They chose a few elite subordinates and snuck into the city before the gates closed.

While Pingting wasn't paying attention, Moran quietly asked Chu Beijie, "I thought again and again, but I still think it's a bit too much of a risk. What should we do if that person takes it back, selling Duke? If it's just us two, then we'll still be able to force our way out, but I'm worried about Miss Bai or genius Doctor Huo."

Chu Beijie calmly replied, "You still haven't met your beloved woman. When you meet her, you'll know why he won't ever take it back. What, do you not believe in my judgement?" Being a main advisor meant being a good judgement of character. Chu Beijie rarely made errors at this and Moran calmed at his words.

The group stopped outside the Governor Residence. They declared themselves as old friends from far away and had come to see Fanlu. The cabinet officer had long been notified by Fanlu who said he had a few old friends coming along. He was supposed to attend to them properly and immediately run inside to pass on their arrival.

Not long later, Fanlu personally came out. He made a submissive gesture when seeing Chu Beijie, "Long time no see, is Brother doing well?" He warmly beckoned Chu Beijie inside.

None of the elite soldiers accompanying Chu Beijie knew what they were up to. They thought boldly showing up on an enemy Governor Residence was certain death but obeyed because Chu Beijie's command was absolute. Seeing how the Governor was acting, half of their worries were put to rest, but they didn't dare drop their guards. Their hands tightened around their sword hilts, not leaving an inch away from Chu Beijie's body.

Only Pingting knew Chu Beijie wasn't rash. She knew he was certain about these actions and so followed him without complaint.

Fanlu lead the crowd into an inner room. He dismissed unrelated people before letting go of Chu Beijie's hand. Moran introduced everyone from one side. He pointed at Pingting, "This is Miss Bai."

Pingting had never seen Fanlu, so she only thought of him as a stranger as she politely inclined her head. She had no idea this man had a deep connection to the tangled matter of her own fake death.

Fanlu knew if it hadn't been for this woman, he might not have been able to meet Zuiju. Thinking of Zuiju, he gave Pingting a rather odd smile.

Moran then pointed at Huo Yunan, "This is genius Doctor Huo."

Once these words came out, Fanlu's expression became serious. He actually fell to his knees onto the ground with a thump.

Huo Yunan was shocked. He knew this person was very important to the Duke of Zhen-Bei and hurriedly tried to help him up. "No, no, I don't deserve this. Allow me to see the important person who has gotten sick. I'm not a talented old man, but my medical skills are decent."

Fanlu stubbornly remained kneeling. "No one's sick. I just have a request to make to you. My name is Fanlu. I look handsome, have great health, shoot brilliantly with a crossbow, treat people whole-heartedly, super smart, learn faster than everyone..."

His speaking pace quickened as he spoke a bunch of random things. Apart from Chu Beijie and Moran, no one else could get their heads around it. After Fanlu spluttered out every possible feature he didn't have, he asked Huo Yunan, "See, are you satisfied with someone like me?"

Huo Yunan felt rather faint headed by his words. He thought Fanlu was kneeling because he wanted to learn medicine. He only had one disciple, Zuiju, for this lifetime and didn't want to take on another, but knowing how important this governor was to the Duke of Zhen-Bei's big plan, he didn't dare offend him. He vaguely replied, "How could I not be satisfied with such talent?"

Hearing these words, Fanlu surprisingly replied, "Then I shall kowtow three times, loud enough to hear."

"No! No, I don't deserve..."

But Huo Yunan's words had yet to fall when Fanlu bowed three times with three thuds. He then stood, his face devoid of its earlier seriousness. He grinned, "Can't deny it now, having received my bows. I'll call you Father-in-Law from now on."

At these words, not only Huo Yunan but even Pingting was shocked.

The crowd exchanged looks while Fanlu seemed to have won a battle or something. He lively jumped up from the ground, rushing down the stairs, loudly yelling, "Fiancee! Fanlu's fiancée! Come greet your Teacher also known as my Father-in-Law."

He had tricked Zuiju into a small room and promised her over and over again that he'd notify her the moment Chu Beijie appeared. But Fanlu hadn't notified Zuiju after Chu Beijie's arrival but butchered up Huo Yunan before everything.

Zuiju had been in the room, restlessly waiting for her Teacher and Miss Bai. Suddenly hearing Fanlu's call from upstairs, she bolted upstairs like crazy. Once she'd stepped into the room, she was faced with familiar faces and choked out, "Miss Bai..." She then turned again, and although she prepared herself earlier, she was completely startled seeing her Teacher right in front of her much thinner than before.

The room was so quiet that even the dropping of a pin could be heard.

Zuiju blankly stood for a long time before her shoulders suddenly shook. She burst into tears, “Teacher! Teacher!”

Huo Yunan stared.

He could no longer hear anything from the moment Zuiju appeared. He felt like he’d stepped onto a group of clouds, his delight so great that all of the things in his mind had just been blown away.

Zuiju, it was that little girl Zuiju...

That physique, that sharp chin, those dark eyes, that expressions...were all of that child Zuiju.

His wise eyes aged by long years gradually became denser. His lips shook yet unable to utter a single word.

A strong energy surged forwards, wrapping around him tightly. The sounds of crying entered his ear, a sound so familiar that it even made such an old man like him want to cry too.

“Teacher...teacher, I finally get to see you.”

Huo Yunan lowered his head. His vision was fuzzy. Through the haze, he saw his beloved disciple already buried in his arms, sobbing. His thoughts were a mess as he mumbled, “Child, child...” He didn’t need to ask anything. He just stroked her back like in the past.

Pingting’s chest felt like it was hurting, and it was a long time before she could finally breathe. She stayed rooted to the spot, her eyes brightly flashing. Someone tugged at her sleeve, and she slowly turned her head. Chu Beijie smiled at her, “Cry in my arms.”

Pingting buried herself and couldn’t help sob.

The crowd finally understood. They joyfully watched the two girls sobbing away like rain. Even genius Doctor Huo’s eyes were red.

Moran stood aside and smiled.

After quietly standing for a while, Fanlu saw Zuiju was still crying without end. He came forwards to tease her, “Don’t cry. Your Teacher has agreed to accept me as his Son-in-Law. I have already loudly kowtowed three times. Hey, you should do three too.”

Zuiju wiped the tears off her face, staring at him, “Who wanted you to kowtow?” She had been crying real hard just a few moments ago, so her eyes were red and swollen. Her voice was a bit hoarse too. She then asked Fanlu, “Why would you call my Teacher your Father-in-Law?”

Fanlu had no objection, freely saying, “Fine, I’ll call him Teacher too.”

Huo Yunan’s heart felt like it was flying after seeing his disciple. He had never been so delighted and painstakingly stopped his tears. Seeing their argument, he looked at Zuiju a bit closer and instantly understood when he saw a faint blush. The delight in his heart became even greater and his nose felt a bit sour again. He quickly covered it up by laughing, “Father-in-Law or Teacher is up to you, and you don’t have to kowtow. You just have to look after my disciple.”

Zuiju was hugely embarrassed “Teacher!”

It would've been dismissed if she hadn't yelped, but as she did, everyone laughed. Pingting also wiped away her tears while in Chu Beijie's embrace. She raised her head, wanting to speak. Chu Beijie blamed himself for trying to hide the fact about Zuiju and hurriedly added, "The important matters are urgent; let's discuss them first."

Everyone knew the situation was dire. They became serious, "Then without further ado, let's stop this idle chat."

Fanlu brought a table forward. He rolled out a scroll on it, his face no longer smiling. "This is the map of Qierou and its neighbouring territory. The five lines in vermilion are the routes of the military's food supply and will all intersect here at Qierou."

He drew this map himself, and it was many times more refined than normal maps. Chu Beijie gave him a look of appreciation, secretly approving of him.

Zuiju didn't understand soldiers or war, so after her big cry at her Teacher's, she thought of Pingting again. She spoke to Huo Yunan, "Teacher, let's go to the room next door and let Zuiju massage for you like in the past?" She looked at Pingting smiled at her with a tearstained face. Immense joy hid in her eyes. As Zuiju walked over, saying, "Miss Bai, we're going to the room next door."

Pingting really wanted to know everything about her right there and then. She pulled her hand, going with her and Huo Yunan into the room next door.

The three people sat down. Zuiju personally served tea, each having their own cups. She then slowly massaged her Teacher's back while recounting in detail what happened after leaving behind Pingting.

Because she was afraid Huo Yunan and Pingting would get angry at Fanlu hence she skipped some of the bad things Fanlu had done.

Huo Yunan listened and chuckled, "You say that he's bad, but he hasn't really done anything bad."

Pingting asked, "Do you like him?"

Zuiju's cheeks were slightly red. She frowned, "Who likes him?"

Both Huo Yunan and Pingting thought, she really does like him.

The three people chatted for a long time while the men on the other side were also in full swing.

Chu Beijie outlined their original plan to Fanlu, who immediately laughed, "Duke has found the right person for this. I've messed around in the army for many years, so I know the army very well. I know which generals of Yun Chang could easily come round as well as the ones who are the firmest."

Chu Beijie was delighted, quickly making his decision. "That's good. Please immediately write a form so we may execute the plan properly."

Pingting was on the other side. After saying goodbye to Zuiju on the day she thought of the supposed death by wolves. She remembered the uncomfortable painful feeling as well as the numerous tears she'd shed. She sighed a few times before mentioning her lively and cute Changxiao. Her tears gradually stopped before she went into the room with Chu Beijie and the others.

When entering, Pingting asked, "Has discussion gone well?"



Chu Beijie turned around and laughed. "It was godsend. Ah, the matter about the military supplies has changed slightly. This time Advisor Bai will surely need to help." He bowed at Pingting.

Pingting knew he was joking and passively let it past. She asked Chu Beijie, "I won't fall for Duke's trap. I bet if I accept this bow, then there's definitely something difficult I have to do. What part has been changed about the military supplies plan?"

She rolled her eyes. Everyone around her was acting mysteriously, their faces enthusiastic. Chu Beijie had definitely thought of some amazing idea.

Chu Beijie smiled at her. He paused for effect before saying, "We're not putting poison, just a drug."

Pingting listened, her eyes furrowed as she pondered. Her delicate eyebrows suddenly loosened. She softly sighed, "What an amazing plan. Rest assured Duke, Pingting will definitely prepare the drug you need."

The other people were used to seeing Pingting's crafty plans, so they just smiled. Fanlu couldn't help study Pingting for a bit, secretly surprised.

After the assembly, Fanlu acknowledged the crowd as old friends to the cabinet officer. After saying goodbye to Chu Beijie and the others, he headed for Zuiju's room like usual.

Just as he got to the room, Zuiju suddenly ran out, standing pressed against the door. "What are you here for? I'm going to talk with my Teacher tonight."

Fanlu looked at her, rather mockingly. "What about tomorrow night?"

"You aren't allowed to come tomorrow either."

Fanlu shrugged, turning to leave.

"Hey." Zuiju was afraid he was angry and hurriedly called him to stop. She asked, "What do you think, now that you've seen them?"

Fanlu thought for a bit and suddenly deeply sighed. "I finally understand why He Xia and Senior Official Gui pulled their guts out to use every method possible to keep them apart."

Who else in the world could compare to them when the two were together?

In hindsight, it seemed that it really was reasonable why He Xia tried to snatch Bai Pingting away from Dong Lin...

## Chapter 70

The wind tapped on the curtains, rustling them towards the courtyard.

Under the same moonlight, He Xia was sitting alone, not asleep.

After everyone's repeated urgings, He Xia went to the Royal Residence of Gui Le. These brilliant golden walls made him even angrier than facing the overgrown wilderness of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

It's difficult to sleep.

After all the tangible enemies were removed, invisible enemies quietly emerged.

The four countries were crushed by the war horses' hooves, and after all the official armies that dared to resist him were eradicated, a new instability emerged instead.

The rumours were spread everywhere.

The Yun Chang army had nothing to do now that they lost their opponents. They were harder to control than before, and the generals' greed became even more difficult to fulfill.

He Xia restlessly paced by the window. He tried to restrain himself and sat down again, carefully studying the document on the table.

There had been absolutely no news from the party sent out to track down Chu Beijie, and they couldn't find any real clues to their whereabouts. As expected of Chu Beijie, he could really hold back. He didn't when the Yun Chang army was attacking Gui Le, using it as an opportunity for public recruitment. He didn't declare it himself, summoning all the remaining rebels to resist.

He Xia guessed this much long ago and even gave Chu Beijie chances to do them, but Chu Beijie didn't.

It was a little unexpected.

That person was just like a breath of wind, briefly popping out in the east before briefly popping out in the west. With just a few little tricks, they played until the tens of thousands of Yun Chang troops were a mess.

But in Bei Mo, there were rumours about the former Main General of Bei Mo, Ruohan, secretly recruiting.

"Someone come."

Two guards and two officers on night shift came out from behind the curtain. They stood in two rows as they bowed, "Here."

He Xia asked, "How has Bei Mo's recruiting been?"

"There are young men escaping from the Bei Mo villages, approximately a dozen hundred every day to somewhere unknown. I have sent several orders about severe punishment, but those damn Bei Mo people seem to have gotten used to seeing fresh blood. They are no longer afraid of cruel punishment and escape without fear or death. I heard the little thief Ruo Han has secretly constructed several recruitment camps. I've sent spies who destroyed two or three of them, but..."

"I didn't ask you about those remnants." He Xia coldly replied, "I asked you about how many we have recruited after putting up our announcements?"

The person standing at the front lowered his head even more. He Xia coldly grunted. He hesitated for a few moments before finally reporting. "So far, about...about...four hundred maybe?"

He Xia was furious, wanting to slam his fist onto the table. He forced himself to hold back, lowering his voice, "Didn't I tell you to give recruited soldiers lenient conditions?"

That officer cautiously answered, "I have. According to Marquess of Jing-An's instructions, Bei Mo citizens who become soldiers will have huge rewards and family tax would be reduced by a half..." He stiffened in horror and didn't say any more when He Xia's eyes flickered to him.

Ever since the news of his intention to establish a new country spread, He Xia planned to gather talented individuals from every country. He wasn't as kind to these old nobles of Yun Chang as before.

Last time when Official Cui, responsible for supplying tea to the Royal House, came into report, he entered in full health. No one knew what he said, but by the time he left, he became a battered and lifeless body. The guards carried his corpse, his blood splattering onto the bluestone tiles. It frightened the officers waiting outside. Two of them fainted on the spot.

"Then what about Gui Le?" He Xia continued asking.

Another officer who often dealt with this kind of thing already guessed He Xia would ask this. He was a bit more prepared. He stepped forward, carefully replying, "After the announcement was made, there were about four hundred recruited."

Even Gui Le had so few?

He Xia's handsomely shaped eyebrows wrinkled. Back when the House of Jing-An was in its glory, with just a raise of his two arms, the number of Gui Le people willing to fight for him without fear or death was too numerous to count.

But it had become like this now...

His eyebrows held a terrible pain. He reached out, rubbing them without changing his expression. His voice seemed to soften though, "You can't be blamed. From today on, reduce the tax by a third in every place. Pass on my Order, at all costs. Regardless of whether they're soldier or general, if they do not obey according to my orders, kill on sight. As for He Su's family...give them the proper treatment of royalty by burial."

The maids beside him could see he was a bit tired, so they quietly served up hot tea for refreshment. He Xia held it in his hands. He smelled it but didn't drink any. He then asked, "Have the treasures for auspiciousness been collected already for the establishment of the new country?"

The people before him were all afraid he'd ask this. Their expressions darkened at his words.

"From the look on the face, it's obvious you weren't able to find a single one. Fine, I won't ask that for now." He Xia said, "There have been rumours everywhere recently. Something like failures surfacing as if symbolising disaster in the future?"

The two officers stood like logs. They snuck a look at each other, neither daring to say a word.

Who dared to report about the ominous incidents in the four countries while He Xia was currently putting all his ambition into building a new country? But Bei Mo, Dong Lin and Gui Le suddenly had several strange incidents.

Mud oozing blood, swallows dropping dead for no reason, statues crying...Everyone was worried enough. After these occurrences, one gossip turned to ten which then became a hundred and to even more people, scaring the world. All in all, the general opinion in establishing the new country would bring disaster.

These rumours gradually made their way to the army camps.

There were already generals in the Yun Chang army that didn't support the establishment of the new country. Although they didn't dare say much, their hearts were whispering otherwise. As for the prisoners of war from the other three countries, at least eight of ten didn't approve of He Xia in the slightest.

He Xia saw they were quiet but wasn't offended. He smiled, "Even though these jokes are ridiculous, they're still enough to scare you. They're just from someone messing around from the shadows. Pass on my Order, all countries are to have their forces strengthened. You pick a few talented individuals, dispatch them everywhere so they can clear things up. They can debunk all these little tricks for me." He then lowered his head to read a few more documents before saying, "You can leave."

The two officers hurriedly left as if granted amnesty. When they stepped out of the room, they looked at each other. Their clothes were completely soaked. When the wind blew, the cold swept right into their bones.

Dongzhuo received orders to command the Yongchang Regiment and hurried over from Yun Chang during the last few days. He had been by He Xia's side since his early years, so his identity was very different to others. Other civil service officials or military generals had to stay in arranged living quarters, but he entered the Royal Residence straight away after entering Gui Le.

While the two officers stepped out, Dongzhuo stepped in. He saw He Xia's eyes closed while leaning on the chair, as if getting some rest. He scanned the accumulated pile of documents on the table before whispering, "Since Master is tired, please get some rest soon."

He repeated twice, before He Xia finally shook his head. "No need." He opened his eyes, "You've been quite busy in the last two days, so go to sleep soon."

Dongzhuo agreed but stood on the spot, not moving for a long time.

He Xia noted he wasn't willing to leave and couldn't help chuckle, "You brat, you're more or less a general when you go out now. How could you be so over-sentimental? Fine, if you don't want to go, stay, since I also wanted to ask, how do you plan to control the Yongchang Regiment?"

"Shang Lu's soldier training was decent. I have gone out to check on them outside the city two times in the last two days. The soldiers were doing the drills well, suggesting their foundation is solid. It's just..." Dongzhuo was a little hesitant, "maybe because I don't have experience in commanding troops nor military qualifications, so although the officers below me are respectful on the surface, they don't approve of me as a general behind my back."

He Xia murmured, "hmm" but didn't say much.

Dongzhuo was feeling a little bit confused about this. He couldn't help ask, "In terms of mobilising troops for war, Fei Zhaoxing is obviously a man with talent. Why wasn't he given rights to command the Yongchang Regiment as well, since he did help Master get rid of Shang Lu?"

When He Xia heard the name, Fei Zhaoxing, he suddenly harrumphed. Dongzhuo's heart jolted. He hurriedly shut his mouth.

In the magnificent royal hall, the suffocating silence surged.

Dongzhuo pretty much grown up with He Xia, so his words had always been casual, without restraint. In recent years, He Xia's thoughts became more unpredictable day by day. Sometimes his expression was so cold, it seemed to fill his heart with a bitter coldness. His Master was nearing the throne closer and closer, but it felt like he became further and further away from himself. With just a harrumph, the supreme, dignified yet murderous air of an emperor would completely swallow his audience up.

At this thought, Dongzhuo couldn't help feel a bit sad.

After a while, He Xia softened his expression. Seeing Dongzhuo stand there carefully, not daring to make the slightest sound, he beckoned to him, whispering, "There's something I want you to do. Fei Zhaoxing hasn't told me about this. He has been dealing with some dangerous men. Corruption, extortion, there's no evil he hasn't done. Find evidence of those crimes for me and take care to keep it a secret, so the news is not leaked."

Dongzhuo was stunned for a few moments.

Needless to say, his Master was planning to deal with Fei Zhaoxing. Like Master's usual actions, when he hadn't started, nothing would happen, but once he did, the chances of Fei Zhaoxing escaping were very slim.

While Dongzhuo was still alarmed, He Xia asked, "Is that clear?"

"Yes." Dongzhuo mumbled.

He Xia's gaze lightly touched his face. He suddenly asked, "Do you think I'm too heartless?"

Dongzhuo hurriedly shook his head.

He Xia's gaze was sharp as he studied him, his eyes black. Dongzhuo felt like there was absolutely nowhere to hide under his gaze, as if his thoughts were being read.

He Xia assessed him for a while before lowering his eyes. He sheepishly laughed, "Who would've thought that things would turn out like this? I'm about to establish the new country and ascend the throne to emperor. You, a reckless little thing, became the general of a huge regiment. Pingting..." He abruptly stopped his words, his handsome face revealing a hint of sadness difficult to describe.

Where was Pingting, the Pingting who stayed by my side during my early years, the Bai Pingting who once played qin for me in the old Royal Residence of Gui Le?

It was very difficult not to remember how her soaring laughter floated through the Jing-An Ducal Residence like a silver bell, pleasant to the ear, leaving glowing petals everywhere it went.

Because of that, He Xia easily found her. He pulled her from the corner of the small building, radiantly saying, "Pingting, let's go riding."

Go riding, go paint, go read, go listen to songs...

Together, to the battlefield...

He Xia stared at the candle, watching the flickering candlelight. Its brightness jumped on his slightly more gentle-looking face.

At that moment, Dongzhuo felt he was seeing the romantic Marquess of Jing-An in the Jing-An Ducal Residence from back then.

The evening breeze wafted over, causing the silk curtains on the open windows of the great hall to gracefully dance.

Dongzhuo whispered, "Master, do you think Pingting is still alive?"

"Chu Beijie left the mountains. Who else apart from Pingting can make him leave them?" At the mention of Chu Beijie, He Xia's gentleness was suddenly missing, replaced by a sharp flashing light in his eyes.

Dongzhuo thought for a bit and couldn't resist saying, "But even now, no one has seen Chu Beijie himself, not to mention Pingting. No matter what, we have to see them in person..."

"I'll kill that person if I do!" He Xia suddenly clenched his teeth, heavily thumping the table.

Dongzhuo's ears began to buzz. He was utterly stunned. It was a long time before he managed to stutter out, "Master...do you mean...Chu Beijie?"

It was very likely that Pingting was associated with Chu Beijie's departure from the mountains. Even Dongzhuo managed to roughly guess that much from He Xia's words. Now that these two unpredictable people came together before an impending battle, it really was the worst of the worst.

If Pingting really did help Chu Beijie fight Master, what could be done if those two were to meet in the future? Dongzhuo was troubled by this for a long time but didn't dare to ask He Xia about it.

He still retained a bit of innocence from the former Jing-An Ducal Residence. He hoped to use today's great opportunity to listen to his Master's intentions and see if there was any hope for change. He didn't believe Pingting would be so heartless.

He Xia's face was very cold. He stressed each syllable, "No, I meant Pingting."

That was definitely not a joking expression.

Dongzhuo never once expected He Xia would reply so directly and firmly. His body suddenly felt cold. It felt like his heart was clawed by a cat, extremely painful and uncomfortable. He shifted slightly backward.

He Xia's expression was very fierce. He stared at the document on the table as if seeing his enemies. It was a long time before his taut expression finally relaxed, even revealing a bit of helpless melancholy. His smile was wry as he murmured, "Why would she do that? Does she not even feel a little bit sentimental?"

Under the red glow of the candle, his handsome face remained pale.

The two were silent as they faced each other, both feeling like they had nothing left to say.

He Xia waved, "Go sleep. Tomorrow still has things to come."

Dongzhuo answered, "Yes." He glumly lowered his head, retreating to the entrance.

From behind, vague and muffled sounds of He Xia's voice came.

"Dance of the skies, dream of the vast emptiness, affection is not strong..." He Xia sighed deeply as if full of thoughts, each hiding indescribable regret.

When he returned to his quarters, Dongzhuo suddenly remembered. The day of the banquet with Yaotian at the Prince Consort Residence, He Xia took advantage of the time to dance out this line with his sword.

That night, the entire courtyard was full of melting yet not melting snow.

Bei Mo's dance maids worn colourful skirts, having drums at their waist. They skilfully tapped the beats as they danced, their freshness appealing and earning Yaotian's delight.

Both husband and wife were in an excellent mood drinking together under the moon

He Xia danced with his sword while Yaotian smiled.

Dance of the skies, dream of the vast emptiness.

Affection.

Is not strong.

Dongzhuo finally understood why He Xia intended to kill Fei Zhaoxing.

He would never forget the time He Xia heard of Fei Zhaoxing's advice to dispose of Yaotian. His own heart had been gently cut off by silent lightning.

Qierou.

It may be because of the messy war to see the peasants without homes and wandering around. The number of people entering the city had gradually multiplied.

"So what? There are many benefits for having many people. Excellent, excellent!" Fanlu listened to his subordinate's report, laughing carefreely.

The Governor's seemed quite refreshed these days, and it seemed his mood has gotten a lot better. His irritability from the last few days was definitely nowhere to be seen.

He crossed his legs as he chatted to the clerk for a bit until he suddenly thought of something. He instructed, "The people at my residence are all old acquaintances from the time I was still in the army. Each and every one of them can kill, and many of them don't like to deal with others. They also hate people who inquire about them. You'd better be careful, don't mess with them."

Dujing knew the Governor was a person from the army. He obediently replied, "I wouldn't dare disturb Sir's friends. Absolutely not, absolutely don't dare to."

"Heh, wouldn't expect you to." Fanlu grinned and laughed.

He knew the news of Chu Beijie hiding in his residence mustn't be leaked at all costs. Otherwise several hundreds of thousands of soldiers would immediately come surround them. Fortunately, Chu Beijie and his men were all shrewd elites trained in the army, so it was unlikely they'd slip up. None of the subordinates in his residence were particularly clever. Only Clerk Dujing was a bit smarter and could probably suspect something.

Fanlu wasn't worried. He already told Moran he sent for a surveillance expert. The moment he became aware, the expert would immediately lash out, ending his life.

Even though he was just a governor, in the mere city of Qierou, he was the dictator. There was no one he couldn't hide. It was also likely that at least eight out of ten of the recent influx of migrants were teams of Chu Beijie's men once stationed outside the city.

While he laughed, he suddenly heard a crisp voice seemingly asking the cabinet officer outside, "Where is the Governor?"

Fanlu leapt to his feet, raising his voice, "I'm here."

Zuiju pushed the door and entered. She held a square tray in her hands. When she saw Fanlu, she smiled slightly. “So even you do things seriously sometimes.” She gingerly stepped closer, gently putting the tray on the table. The tray held a bowl of steaming rice porridge.

Fanlu looked at Zuiju and then looked at the porridge. His smile came from his heart, but his mouth deliberately said, “I’ve already had breakfast.”

Zuiju wasn’t angry. She simply said, “Oh, then give it to the Clerk.”

Dujing hurriedly shook it off. “I dare not to! I dare not to! Sir, I must go to deal with affairs first.”

“How could you possibly dare eat my food?” Fanlu snatched the bowl, not letting go of it.

Dujing knew this was Fanlu’s personal problems. It was something he should never get himself mixed into it, so he didn’t. He immediately excused himself and considerately closed the door for them when leaving.

Fanlu held the bowl, sometimes saying it was too hot, other times saying the flavour was too bland. When he finished the entire bowl of porridge, he burped in pleasure, praising Zuiju, “Ever since seeing Father-in-Law, you’ve been a lot more obedient.”

Zuiju asked, “Shall I be obedient like this in the future too?”

Fanlu nodded vigorously, “Of course, of course! That would be good!”

Zuiju said, “Teacher said I should know what’s important, not get in the way. I won’t bother with your work, so I’ll come later to accompany you.” She got up and left.

This miracle made Fanlu very delighted, but because Zuiju praised him for taking his work seriously, he couldn’t shamelessly ditch his work to follow her. He could only attentively do his work, planning to indulge himself with Zuiju for a whole day when he was finished.

When he was about to finish his work, as expected, Zuiju pushed the door open. She smiled as she looked at Fanlu, “Are you still doing well?”

Fanlu retorted, “Very well. Why wouldn’t I be?” Seeing Zuiju’s expression, his heart plummeted. His expression changed, “What did you put in the porridge?” It would’ve been better if he hadn’t said that. As he did, Zuiju abruptly got to his feet and felt most of his energy completely depleted. His two legs shook, and his entire body felt a rather itchy.

Zuiju pursed her lips to a smile, pretentiously checking his pulse at the wrist. She giggled, “Miss Bai is amazing. Even though it cannot diagnose any illness, the victim cannot detect they’ve been drugged”

Fanlu was so angry his teeth felt like they’ve been grinded to dust. He reached out to grab Zuiju, but he didn’t have enough energy so his speed was naturally quite slow. Zuiju easily dodged. Fanlu fumed, “Why did you try it on me?”

Zuiju was laughing at first, but at his question, her expression cooled down. She stared at him, her hands on her hips. “Say, why did you tell Teacher that I...that I have...slept with you?”

Fanlu was angry at first but after hearing her question and seeing her blushed, he couldn’t help sit back in his seat. He clutched to his stomach while insolently laughed.

Zuiju shot daggers at him.



When Fanlu had his fill in laughs, he said, "That's just idle chat, so I'll admit it. Your drugging is justified. Though, why don't we make this idle chat become something that isn't idle chat tonight. What's done cannot be undone..." He had yet to finish when severe hits and punches rained.

Fanlu whined a bit, asking, "How long is this stuff effective?"

She felt a lot more comfortable after punching him a few times. She replied, "It can be long or short depending on your constitution. You don't know how difficult it was to prepare this. I know medicine and helped at the side. The extremely diverse types of herbs made even me feel a bit dizzy. It really is amazing Miss Bai knows so much." She then triumphantly continued, "Even silver needles can't detect it in rice porridge. Those who eat it only feel languid and further effects, depending on the person. Some will have their limbs completely drained of strength while others will completely sleep, but no detectable symptoms are left on the body. Even Yun Chang generals can't suspect it. See, don't you think that's pretty interesting?"

Fanlu rolled his eyes at her, sighing, "I know you're only delighted because the one who got tested was me. Sigh, if this result hadn't been the way you expected, then you would've murdered your husband."

Zuiju poked her tongue out at him, "Got that right. I really am happy because of that." Ignoring the currently miserable Fanlu due to her actions, she went toward the backyard alone.

Pingting was busily preparing various drugs in the last few days, so she hadn't slept at all. Once they were prepared, she was barely able to stand her ground. Huo Yunan hurriedly took her pulse and wrote a few prescriptions. After Zuiju shooed away the yet to recover Fanlu, she came to accompany her for most of the night.

Pingting advised, "You've always been helping beside me, so you're tired too. Get some rest soon. What am I to do if you get sick too?"

Zuiju said, "I'll stay for a bit longer before leaving. I'll wait until you fall asleep."

Pingting said, "I'll only want to talk to you if you're here. I wouldn't want to sleep even more."

At Pingting's words, Zuiju smiled and returned to her room. Pingting leaned against her pillow for a while, gradually entering sleep. In her haze, she felt someone stroking her hair. She murmured, "You're back?" She opened her eyes to see moonlight scattering in from the window, while Chu Beijie sat at the head of the bed. He had yet to get in his night clothes, appearing to have only just returned.

"Why is your forehead so hot?"

"Duke's return has perfect timing. The drug has been prepared today. The drug is just as we want. We'll prepare it again tomorrow, so we may have more doses and it will be enough for anything."

Pingting knew he was annoyed at her for not looking after her health. She pursed her lips and smiled, "Has Duke accomplished the goal of this departure?"

"Sneaking into the enemy camp and cutting down once was enough. I didn't use the Divine Spirit Sword this time, just a knife to prevent recognisable marks." Chu Beijie undid the sword at his waist with one hand, placing it on the table. His expression was serious, "If I end up cornered in the future, I ought to be an assassin."

Pingting gently replied, "I know Duke wouldn't do such underground deals. If we have enough troops, Duke would definitely agree to decide victory against the enemy generals on the battlefield."

Chu Beijie held her tightly, solemnly answering, "For you, I will agree to do anything. What is assassination when you're supposed to do anything when it comes to clashing armies?"

This rang in Pingting's ears for a bit before so she softly asked, "Any news from outside?"

Chu Beijie didn't want to let Pingting know at first, but he couldn't hide it now that she'd asked. He sighed, "I assigned Ruo Han and the others to create inauspicious disturbances, cause panic amongst the peasants so He Xia wouldn't be able to immediately ascend to the throne. While this could fool others, it couldn't fool He Xia. He sent his Order to get the elites of the army to trace them down and somehow managed to find the trails of our people."

Pingting softly gasped.

Chu Beijie was silent for a while, "Huacan died. Luoshang's side is unknown. Contact has been completely cut off, so I'm afraid the odds are against us. I have immediately ordered Ruo Han to stop all actions, so he wouldn't catch any attention again. But no matter what, thanks to these disturbances, the number of established families against the formation of a new country has increased quite a lot." He hesitated before continuing, "He Xia also knows not every single one of the Yun Chang generals would agree to his desire of establishing a new country, so he is eager to expand his personal troops. He has been doing major recruitment in Bei Mo and Gui Le, but not many are willing to join."

Pingting sighed, tucking herself deep into Chu Beijie's arms. "Master is becoming more and more unpopular."

Gui Le's Marquess of Jing-An of the past used to recruit numerous willing Gui Le people to fight for him without fear or death by just a raise of his two arms.

Killing the entire family of the surrendered King of Gui Le was indeed He Xia's fatal error.

Pingting abruptly shuddered. She was calculating each error her Master made, thinking how it can be used in her planning...

Reality seemed to be mocking people, in a way that was too heartless.

Master had already returned to the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

But those tolerant, gentle days were already a thousand miles away.

Like that, who else did his heart have left to yearn for under the moonlight?

## Chapter 71

In Gui Le City, everyone in the Royal Residence was forbidden from making sound. Even footsteps were muffled.

The Marquess of Jing-An who could decide death in a single word was furious today.

Fei Zhaoxing hurriedly walked inside. Seeing He Xia's warmthless expression, he showed a sign of submission. He cautiously stood at one side, waiting for He Xia's questioning.

"You're here." He Xia looked at him, not asking about what he'd been up to recently. He pointed at his table stacked high with documents. "Look at this, even though I've repeatedly clarified that these inauspicious incidents are merely someone messing around in the shadows and all that's needed is to send troops to deal with the lurkers, these ignorant fools actually still try to hand reports to me, requesting me to not rush on establishing the new country, saying that it's God's wrath. What wrath, unless they mean the skies aren't willing for me to take the throne?"

Fei Zhaoxing knew his anger wasn't light. He quickly agreed, "Marquess of Jing-An is correct. These ignorant people don't even understand what's important to a country, so don't be too angry at them, Marquess of Jing-An. As for the establishment of the new country, following Marquess of Jing-An's intentions is good."

"I thought that at first too, but it won't work." He Xia's anger cooled down slightly. He sighed, "There's been no movement uncovered from Chu Beijie's side. I suspect those generals have enough of credit or they're afraid of Chu Beijie, so they don't dare to put full effort into hunting them. I really want to immediately send out troops when we find Chu Beijie's location..."

He seemed to realise he had lost his composure, so he paused for a brief moment. He drank a mouthful of the served tea, calmly continuing, "There's been a lot of things going on these days. The recruiting hasn't gone well, and at first I didn't want Yun Chang to supply resources for the army, but Dong Lin, Gui Le and Bei Mo have suffered years of war. A lot of their land has been abandoned, temporarily unable to supply enough rations."

Because of the problem of forage, most of the refurbishment troops were left in Gui Le. Every part of the Yun Chang Royal Residence reminded He Xia of Yaotian, so he often felt his heart was unbearably pained and subconsciously wasn't willing to immediately return.

Of the seven Yun Chang regiments, Gui Yan's Yongxiao Regiment was annihilated at the start of the war. He Xia had used prisoners of war from the various countries to form a new Yongxiao Regiment as supplement. Fei Zhaoxing did his secret calculations. Currently, two regiments were stationed in Gui Le. One was scattered across Bei Mo and Dong Lin while the remaining three were all in Yun Chang.

The four countries had yet to settle, and the main commander was away from Yun Chang for a while. It really was a bit dangerous.

If it were the past, Fei Zhaoxing would've definitely and bluntly tell He Xia, but ever since his suspicion, he was much more reserved about everything. He stood at one side and thought about suggesting, "Chu Beijie is a scourge. Although he is currently in hiding, he mustn't be ignored. He should be hidden in Dong Lin. If one regiment can't find him, then send more people to look should be enough to find traces eventually. Why not send me, or General Cui's Ganfeng Regiment to Dong Lin, to cooperate with the hunting?"

He Xia quietened, his face unhappy as he murmured, "You probably don't know the news that just reached here this morning. Cui Linjian has been assassinated."

"Ah?"

Cui Linjian was a young general He Xia recently promoted. He was only twenty-two, but he was very smart and worked well. He was very loyal to He Xia thanks to his promotion. His death was a major blow to He Xia, who wanted to insert his confidants in the military to gradually and completely take control of all military power.

"He was decapitated in the middle of the night in his own tent. The head was hung on the door post."

Fei Zhaoxing asked, "Could it be Chu Beijie's doing? We ought to immediately assign a general to take charge. The entire Ganfeng Regiment's men lost their main commander."

"Who do you think is best to take over?"

Of course Fei Zhaoxing wouldn't say himself. He picked the most obvious choice to say, "It's too difficult to find the right person last minutely. General Qing Tian's Shuitai Regiment is closest to the Ganfeng Regiment. Why not integrate the two regiments together, temporarily all under General Qing Tian's command?"

He Xia shook his head, his eyebrows furrowing. "Although Chu Beijie does have the skill, it may not be him. Only someone familiar with the internal structure of the Yun Chang army would choose to attack Cui Linjian. I'm afraid it might not be that simple."

Fei Zhaoxing was intelligent too, and he immediately understood Yun Chang's meaning. Cui Linjian wasn't a Yun Chang resident, nor was he an aged veteran in the army. Many important generals of Yun Chang held objections in their heart towards the former commander of the Ganfeng Regiment, and Qing Tian was one of the ones who complained the most.

But who in the army could possibly dare to assassinate the commander of a regiment during this time of power struggle?

He secretly blamed himself for speaking so quickly, as if helping Qing Tian gain another regiment. He regretted it immensely and hurriedly tried to work around it, "Then should we send more troops to deal with Chu Beijie? I'm currently dealing with the tasks Marquess of Jing-An has given me, so I'm afraid I can't leave. So why not send General Qing Tian's Shuitai Regiment as reinforcement?"

He Xia finally nodded, "Then send him." He approached the table, lifted the pen, and wrote an Order. He added his own seal, handed it to a guard, and asked Fei Zhaoxing, "How has the matter about the crown been going?"

Fei Zhaoxing reported, "The craftsmen have been found. Two of them are from Gui Le while another decent one is from Dong Lin. Both are well-known masters of their trade and hid as war fell. Finding them was quite a task. All sorts of precious gemstones and metals have been collected. The one in the middlemost stone is planned to be the best sapphire. Currently a single useable one has been found. The crown's materials have been sorted, but the Queen's..."

"Use it for the Queen's crown first."

"Marquess of Jing-An?" Fei Zhaoxing hesitated as he asked.

"Give the gems for the Queen's crown first. You can slowly prepare the King's, so don't worry about it. Remember, the craftsmanship must be exquisite and the materials in high-quality, especially the Queen's crown."

Fei Zhaoxing looked at He Xia's expression with puzzlement. His handsome face had a faint experience, as if always having undispersed fog. He was standing right there, but he seemed very distant. He could only answer 'yes' before backing away.

When returning to his base, his subordinate, General An excitedly hurried over again, inviting him out to drink.

General An was an old veteran of the Yun Chang army. Fei Zhaoxing was much more seasoned than Dongzhuo. Even though he'd taken over the Weibei Regiment after Gui Changning's death, he spent much effort to get along and win over several generals, both on the surface and underneath. Seeing General An, Fei Zhaoxing smiled, "Drink again? General has gained a number of accomplishments, and the Marquess of Jing-An gives a lot of reward. Why not buy a large piece of land, set up a residence, and marry a few pretty women to enjoy life? That's much more interesting compared to drinking."

General An waved his hand. "I just love drinking alcohol. I don't know when I'll be finished, being a person who kills out on the battlefield. One woman is enough. If I marry more, there'll be more widows in the future." He sighed, "Women aren't any good anyway. Look at Chu Beijie; he disturbed others by disappearing for a woman. I heard he appeared recently. Heh, I reckon that's a lie. As for our Prince Consort..." He suddenly remembered He Xia had strictly forbidden others from referring to him as the Prince Consort. He abruptly stopped.

Fei Zhaoxing's heart jumped endlessly. He smiled and asked, "What about the Prince Consort?"

General An scratched his head, “The Marquess of Jing-An is deeply in love, but it’s a pity about our Princess who had such bad fortune to actually die while giving birth. If she were still alive today, then she would enjoy this endless splendor.”

Fei Zhaoxing felt these words were becoming increasingly out of place. His expression changed slightly, and he pondered, “I was just worrying about the size of the Queen’s crown I’ve been ordered to prepare recently. Perhaps the Marquess of Jing-An is going to find a new queen when he ascends the throne?”

General An was a pompous man, so he didn’t notice Fei Zhaoxing’s expression. His hand waved a few times, “Where can you find such a queen? Has General seen any woman around the Marquess of Jing-An? Even if he does marry again, I reckon she’ll only be a concubine. That’s why I say the Marquess of Jing-An was quite nice to our Princess. I heard that in Yun Chang, he ordered the Princess’ grave to undergo grand renovation. Tsk tsk, those little small-hearted guys secretly attack, saying the Prince Consort killed the Princess, but I reckon that’s impossible due to the feelings between husband and wife.”

When Fei Zhaoxing heard these words, the tightly knotted, messy strands of confusion in his mind felt like it had been completely slapped clean by a hand from the skies. He suddenly understood everything.

He stiffened, rooted on the spot.

General An finally realised something was wrong. “General, what’s wrong?”

Fei Zhaoxing dazedly replied, “I suddenly thought of something urgent, and I must go do it immediately. I’ll accompany you on another day.”

He hurried to an inner room and pushed close the door so all of the sky’s gorgeous sun was blocked outside.

A biting cold rushed upwards from the soles of his feet.

He Xia intended to murder.

For Yaotian, He Xia wanted to take revenge for Yaotian.

No wonder, out of so many people, he picked the arrangement of the Queen’s Crown as well as finding men to renovate Yaotian’s grave. It felt like he just turned his head, only to realise that a huge wire overhead about to trap a big fish, him.

Remembering how he’d thought that only wealth lay in the future, he realised it was just a bubble. He Xia had already become the world’s most powerful man, hence taking his, Fei Zhaoxing’s, life, was nothing to matter.

Although he’d repeatedly advised He Xia to kill, he had really wholeheartedly done it for the sake of He Xia’s own authority.

Now that He Xia killed Yaotian and regretted it immensely, he decided to use Fei Zhaoxing as a scapegoat to vent out his anger.

Fei Zhaoxing’s cold sweat oozed downwards. He was both angry and depressed. His fist clenched until his nails dug into his flesh.

The plan with the drugs was proceeding very successfully.

Fanlu's physique was extraordinary. Zuiju hadn't used much either, so he completely recovered in two or three days. Zuiju then gave him a task, "Find a way to mix this into the food supply." She had a huge bag of the mentioned drugs in her hand.

"How do you mix it? All the food supplies are confined in sacks, unless you want me to undo each and put the drugs in? Do you think those officials in charge of supplies are fools?"

"You're the fool. No one asked you to open them." Zuiju took out a small amount to demonstrate. "Dissolve a little powder in water and pour it over the sacks. Won't the drugs then diffuse through?"

This idea was good. Such a small bowl of drugs would be utterly undetectable even when poured over. Although only the grains dampened would have the desired effect, the rice of army meals tended to be cooked sack by sack, in one huge pot. Who wouldn't miss out on it then?

Zuiju handed Fanlu the bag, but he didn't take it. He gave her a deadpan look, "What reward do I get for helping you do this important job?"

Zuiju's expression was immovable, "It's not like only you can do this job. With such an easy task, the Duke can randomly send out someone to impersonate a patrol issued out by you to inspect the food supply. I just thought that you looked rather idle, so I helped find something for you to do."

Fanlu harrumphed unhappily a few times, but he took the bag anyway.

In the few days that followed, there were some vague news.

First, it was suspected that a plague hit the army. The army doctors didn't know what was going on exactly, so several famous doctors from the various cities outside went to check.

Later, the symptoms were diagnosed. They all said that it wasn't a plague. The soldiers were most likely unaccustomed to the climate.

"They weren't stupid either. They first suspected it was the food that was the problem, so they examined it over and over again, yet couldn't find anything at all. I've been quite cooperative too. I've immediately sent some rations of the poisoned stock from Qierou. I have even specifically indicated that this poison was probably not able to be detected by silver needles, so dry Asteraceae grass and water should be used instead. If the water turned black, then there was poison. I think that'll muddle them for a bit longer."

Fanlu's words caused all of the people inside the room to burst into laughter.

Only Zuiju glared at him. "Why lie for no reason? They could suspect you because of that, bringing great disaster."

Pingting sat by Zuiju's side and lightly held Zuiju's hand at her words. She turned to her, quietly explaining, "There really are poisons like that. He isn't lying."

Chu Beijie also said, "We're planning to tackle this general for a bit. Letting Fanlu please him first. A bit of friendship is good."

Only then did Zuiju realised she wrongly accused Fanlu. At first she wanted to apologise, but when she raised her head, she saw Fanlu beamingly smugly as he winked at her. Her apologetic words swallowed with a loud gulp, hurling itself right back into her stomach.

Moran asked, "What other news?"

“Lots of news, as if the heavens are helping us.” Fanlu was the main source of the news about the Yun Chang internal structures and so everyone had gathered around where he sat. At the mention of army, Fanlu was even more delighted. He was very attentive as he dramatised, “First of all, the Duke of Zhen-Bei is to be praised. Assassinating Cui Linjian was done with a knife, not the Divine Spirit sword.”

Chu Beijie faintly replied, “Choosing Cui Linjian was completely your merit. Without you, the current situation is impossible.”

At his words, Fanlu knew Chu Beijie pretty much guessed everything about the current situation. He was only getting him to clarify the situation on his behalf so that he, “a Governor of Yun Chang” could more successfully integrate Chu Beijie’s men. He couldn’t help give Chu Beijie an appreciative glance as he continued to speak, “Cui Linjian’s death has caused He Xia to suspect Qingtian. Because He Xia has been actively replacing veterans in the Yun Chang army with newcomers, there have been complaints everywhere from these Yun Chang veterans. Cui Linjian was currently the highest promoted amongst the young generals. Yes, he isn’t a Yun Chang citizen.”

Moran was listening very carefully. He asked Fanlu, “Don’t tell me you have spies in Gui Le? You’re very sure that He Xia is suspecting Qing Tian.”

Fanlu chuckled, “How could I possibly have the skill to insert spies by He Xia’s side? But it isn’t hard to know. Although the Ganfeng Regiment is without a commander due to Cui Linjian’s death, He Xia didn’t send the nearby Qing Tian to takeover the Ganfeng Regiment. Instead he ordered him to go to Dong Lin to hunt the Duke of Zhen-Bei.” He paused, glancing at Chu Beijie.

Zuiju bursted into laughter. “That Qing Tian sure is unlucky. Everyone in his regiment currently has no energy to move their limbs, and they can’t find the reason for it, so it’s completely impossible for them to go to Dong Lin. He Xia would certainly hate him even more, thanks to their delay of military orders.” Seeing how the others silently looked at her, she blushed slightly, “Did I say something wrong?”

Fanlu said, “It’s because you were right. We all felt very surprised.” Zuiju’s eyes widened, but she had yet to speak before Fanlu turned back to Pingting. He bowed, sighing, “As expected of Miss Bai. I admire. I admire it.”

Pingting replied, “Governor flatters me. This plan, one that’s strong by playing weak, relies heavily on location. It’s all what the Duke thought of, not Pingting’s own accomplishment.”

Fanlu shook his head, “Miss can’t put it like that. Without Miss, who else could create such a wonderful drug?”

Zuiju thought for a moment, finally understanding. The reason why Chu Beijie planned to put in drugs was to create tension between Qing Tian and He Xia. Assassination, create the drug, put it in, allow Fanlu to develop friendship with Qing Tian, had all been linked together. Zuiju spat a little, mumbling to herself, “When it comes to war, you men are really quite vigorous, to go around in a huge loop to do something.” She suddenly remembered Pingting was sitting at one side, but she wasn’t a man. She poked out her tongue, raising her head to pull a face at Pingting.

Recently, Huo Yunan was also listening to their military discussions with interest, so he had his own seat to occupy. He raised his voice, asking, “From what I see from this situation, Duke’s intention to shake the Yun Chang morale has already been achieved. Are you planning to personally go to draw out Qing Tian?”

Pingting shook her head thoughtfully. “The situation has yet to mature. The generals in the army won’t rebel so easily.”

“I too think the situation has yet to mature. Qing Tian won’t immediately betray He Xia.” Chu Beijie revealed a warm and handsome smile before changing the subject, “But time is precious, I still plan to immediately go see Qing Tian.”

“Duke?”

“If it has yet to mature, then it’s possible to let it mature a bit quicker.”

Fanlu began to feel excited. “Please bring me alone, Duke. I once stayed in the Shuitai Regiment for a bit, so I’m quite used to them. Maybe there’s something I can do to help...”

Moran immediately asked, “Are you good friends with Qing Tian?”

Fanlu chuckled, “Back then my position was very low. There was no way for me to have a chance to personally meet General Qing Tian. But spies are the greatest masters of looking at people. He doesn’t know me, but I’ve often secretly watched him.”

Without further ado, the crowd considered all things properly and immediately set down the plans.

Chu Beijie and Moran took ten elites, as well as Fanlu, immediately setting out of the city.

It was the first time Fanlu actually set off with them. Zuiju was a little bit worried, tugging at Fanlu’s sleeve. She beckoned him to a corner, lowering her voice, “Do you have to go?”

“Of course,” Fanlu held out his large palms, “See, my palms are dreadfully itchy.”

Zuiju said, “For some reason, my heart is pounding. You have to be more careful during this outing.”

Fanlu was rather sarcastic. “Heart is pounding? Geez, that’s a bad omen in the army. Come, let me touch it, so it won’t pound any more.”

At first Zuiju was scared pale white by him but didn’t expect his final words would be that. She was so angry she rolled her eyes, batting away Fanlu’s outstretched claws before striding away.

Chu Beijie and the other dozen people left the city. They hurried all the way, heading straight for the grounds near the Shuitai Regiment until the sky darkened. Everyone hid in ambush outside, staring at the tiny little lights across the empty space in front.

Chu Beijie quietly whispered his arrangement. “I will go find Qing Tian directly. Moran and Fanlu, sneak into the camp and provide assistance immediately when required. If something unexpected happens inside, we will immediately fight our way out from the east. The rest only needs to create fire, don’t try to forcefully clash as creating a bit of chaos for us to escape is enough.”

He instructed the approximate details in a few sentences. Each of the group were experts in their respective trades and knew how to adlib when required, so they didn’t need any further instructions either.

Chu Beijie’s piercing eyes were fixed on the other side. He stared into the emptiness, “Let’s go.” Moran and Fanlu followed him. All of them were dressed in black, including the cloth masking their faces. They were like three shadows, silently and effortlessly entering the enemy camp.

This was the location the Shuitai Regiment was stationed to for a long time. The camp wasn’t made with those temporary, makeshift leather tents but yards of proper layered fences. The tents were like little buildings of an undecorated residence. The brightly lit centremost house was Qing Tian’s residence.

Chu Beijie hid back and forth to escape the small patrol squads, heading straight for the central, commander’s tent. Moran coordinated with him for a while, so he too quietly managed to near the central tent.



Fanlu had been in the Shuitai Regiment before and was more familiar with it than Chu Beijie and Moran. He was extraordinarily courageous. When he passed by a small room, he glimpsed to check if anyone was inside before entering and finding a set of the Shuitai Regiment's uniform. He dressed in it and swaggered out.

The patrol rule for whistle calls has remained unchanged for many years hence eavesdropping for that night's password would be enough. Fanlu stood in a dark corner, listening to the small squads interact.

"Peace to the Princess."

"Great fortune to Yun Chang."

Fanlu thought, the Princess has already died. This Qing Tian sure had a conscience, not completely forgetting his former Master. Since the night's password was obtained, there was no longer a need to hide. Fanlu stepped out from the shadows, taking the opportunity to look around. For anyone he encountered who asked anything, he replied with the same password. Hearing how he had the Yun Chang accent, his behaviour being obviously military in origin, and not to mention he had the right password, no one suspected him.

Chu Beijie should have already snuck to where Qing Tian was. Fanlu kept on heading to the centre, planning to let Chu Beijie see how cool he was. He had yet to reach the innermost when Fanlu abruptly stopped. He turned to the room on his left. He remembered there used to be nothing in that building in the past, but the number of guards stationed had noticeably increased. There was a flag stuck on the door. When it fluttered in the wind, the character "Xia" seemed to dance in the wind.

As a spy, his gaze was even sharper than a thief's. He instantly knew there was something strange hidden inside.

He hid himself, assessing the place for a long time. He suddenly revealed a sly smile, "Fortunately I passed by here." He turned and walked, taking advantage of the night and heading for the sound of water. He muttered, "I just remembered there was a river here." He was never someone to sit around, a born spy, so he always explored every nook and cranny of the topography around him. The Shuitai Regiment's annual station here was certainly no exception.

Fanlu once sneaked to this river and knew its undercurrent would pass by that house.

He slipped into the water like a loach, not giving a single splash. When in the water, his breathing slowed. He swam continuously. After a while, it appeared there was space overhead. He floated up, his head right on the stone ceiling. There was only a small gap between the ceiling and the surface of the water, but it was enough to reveal his mouth and nose, letting him breathe temporarily.

Fanlu took in another deep breath, diving back down. This time he swam even further than before. The water was dark, so he could only fumble out his way. His lungs began to heat up slightly when he suddenly bumped into something. Fanlu reached out to touch it, immediately realising that it was an iron lever. He yelped in alarm.

There had never been an iron lever here. Fanlu remembered what Zuiju said to him before he left and his heart sighed. Was this really the way his life was to be?

He particularly regretted for being so conceited which caused him to die so unjustly.

His chest felt like it had been engulfed by fire, but Fanlu didn't dare open his mouth. He understood that opening his mouth at that moment was not only futile but would undoubtedly send him to his death. He held onto the iron lever, desperately shaking it.

The pain from lacking air boiled in him. His mind was a mess. He could only use all his energy to struggle.

At that moment, the iron lever on his hand shook slightly. Although it was just a bit, Fanlu's spirits were lifted. He shook it even more forcefully, using his feet to hit it underwater.

Almost all of the air in Fanlu's lungs was used up, so his strength declined steadily. In his haze, he felt like he heard Zuiju's voice. Fanlu shuddered before continuing his struggle

When he was about to despair, the iron lever moved again. It moved much further than before, its foundations appearing to have loosened. Fanlu hurriedly leaned forwards, so his entire face was past the lever.

The skies are really helping me!

Already near-death, Fanlu struggled to squeeze himself past. He didn't care about the multiple scrapes and thrashed to get to the surface of the water. He didn't expect a thick stone ceiling there. There wasn't a chance to even float.

Fanlu's heart plummeted. With a hand groping the rock overhead, he did everything to swim forwards. He swam for a bit. Only after all his energy seemed to have been depleted did he feel a coolness on his palm. Fanlu was delighted. He violently kicked the bottom, and his face popped out on the surface. Huge amounts of precious air greeted him.

Fanlu panted in huge gulps, scattering water droplets as he climbed out. He always brought matches with him, carefully wrapped in oil paper. He lit a fire and looked around him, muttering darkly, "Damn that Tian bastard, he actually made a water dungeon and almost caused me to drown."

It seemed Fanlu wasn't the only person who discovered this water route. This place obviously underwent some renovation for the underground water to be used. No wonder iron bars had been installed to prevent human interaction.

Perhaps it was because the blacksmith who forged the iron bars thought they were going to be underwater, unseen, that he worked on it sloppily. The iron bars were easy to loosen, but it was this that saved Fanlu's life.

Fanlu remembered he was in enemy territory and extinguished the flame. He carefully made his way inside where the walls flickered with the light of an oil lamp. The light was about as small as a soybean, but it was enough to cast the entire room in a hazy light.

The two guarding soldiers were lying asleep on the table, snoring. A pile of bottles were by their feet. With so many guards outside, the chances of the inside being as secure were ten thousand to one. Who would expect a certain fiend would come out from the water?

Fanlu approached those two. He viciously struck the back of their heads for them to properly faint.

"Why don't I go see who needs to be locked up so securely?"

He looked inside the prison where a tall figured man sat. His eyes were shining in the dark, and his expression was piercing.

Fanlu asked across the prison door, "Hey, who are you?"

The man had bandages wrapped around his shoulders and legs. He coldly noted how Fanlu appeared, wearing a dripping wet military Yun Chang army uniform and knocking out the guards. But he showed no surprise, he just assessed Fanlu a bit. "And who are you?"

He had been locked up for a long time. His hair and beard were a mess and his face was largely obscured so even Fanlu couldn't recognise him. But when he spoke, his words had the superior momentum that belonged to senior generals. Fanlu was stunned for a few moments and looked more closely at his features, feeling they were increasingly familiar as he looked. His expression suddenly revealed shock. "You are Bei Mo's Ze Yin!"

All of the Bei Mo citizens thought Ze Yin was killed by He Xia after his challenge. Who would possibly expect he was secretly imprisoned inside the Shuitai Regiment's campsite?

"I've seen you before. You're Bei Mo's Main General, Ze Yin."

Ze Yin didn't make a sound. He knew Fanlu was a person from the Yun Chang army at first sight, and his heart was alerted him to be on his guard for it may be He Xia's trick. He couldn't speak; he didn't speak.

"Why are you locked up here? How long have you been in here?"

Fanlu asked a few questions in succession, but Ze Yin didn't answer. He knew Ze Yin was suspicious of him and secretly thought, I risked my life to get here, but you don't appreciate it. I ain't happy. His expression cooled, "Do you know who I am?"

Ze Yin heard his tone and became increasingly certain that he was someone who'd been in the Yun Chang army for many years. This person was most likely a spy sent by He Xia. He frowned, "Say what you want. If you don't, then get out."

"I'm yer son Ze Qing's godfather!" He had been listening to Zuiju about what Pingting had told to her so he obviously knew about Yangfeng and Ze Qing.

His words had yet to fall before Ze Qing abruptly leapt to his feet in the prison room. He stiffly walked a few steps, his pace suddenly increasing a bit more. His voice was solemn, "A lot of people know my son is Ze Qing. Don't you dare try to fool me."

Fanlu harrumphed loudly, not bothering to answer. He took the keys off the two guards and opened the prison door. He mumbled to himself, "Poor godson, I wanted to save your real father's life, but he says he doesn't want to see you. He just wants to wait and die here. When I think of how you and your mother will be bullied since you don't have a father or your godfather by your side, it's quite pitiful."

Ze Yin was slightly startled.

Being imprisoned for so long, he had no news of his wife and son. It felt like his heart was clawed out when he thought of how they would have lost his protection, causing them to be bullied in all sorts of ways by others.

Fanlu didn't look at him. He just stretched. "I'm going to go. The people outside are still waiting for me. You can escape under the water and follow me if you want. It's up to you." He turned and headed to where he came from.

Ze Yin was a little hesitant, but he immediately caught up. He made up his mind to not see Yangfeng after leaving this place nor leak a single word to this person. Even if this was an enemy trick, it will do no good.

Outside the camp, two shadows quietly sneaked back.

When the people waiting outside saw them, they instantly sighed in relief.

Chu Beijie and Moran hid themselves, asking the others, "Has Fanlu returned?"

Everyone shook their heads. Moran's heart sank a bit. He lowered his voice, "I'll go in again."

"No need. He knows this place better than us. wait a bit."

The people uneasily waited for a while, mentally scolding Fanlu in every brutal way possible. Even Chu Beijie's eyebrows were locked in frown.

How were they to explain to Zuiju if Fanlu got trapped inside? Forget about rescuing. If they broke in to rescue him, all their plans would be destroyed.

While they were still extremely worried, Fanlu finally appeared. His clothes were wet. Because he lurked out, quite a lot of dust stuck to his body. In the black night, his clothes looked very gray-yellow.

Once seeing Chu Beijie, Fanlu didn't bother explaining where he went. He began by asking, "Has Duke seen Qing Tian?"

Chu Beijie planned to scold him a bit, but after consideration, he decided now wasn't the time. He lightly replied, "When I went, he was reading an urgent order from He Xia. He was scolded for disobeying military orders in not leading his troops immediately to Dong Lin."

When Moran saw Fanlu had returned, his worries about Zuiju were put to rest. He revealed a faint smile and purposefully relaxed the atmosphere, "To be honest, just the fact that Qing Tian didn't immediately call his men to capture the Duke when they met is already enough to determine Qing Tian's mind has been a little shaken."

"Qing Tian is really unfortunate. His relationship with He Xia is getting increasingly worse. Firstly, he is suspected of killing Cui Linjian. Secondly, he's suspected of lying about sick soldiers so that he could disregard the military orders, and now I've helped him get another really important third reason."

Chu Beijie understood there was a deeper meaning underneath. "What reason can be so important?"

Fanlu chuckled, "Isn't it quite disastrous if he loses an important prisoner He Xia ordered to keep in secret custody? The first two reasons are only He Xia's suspicions, but he can't do anything about a great general like Qing Tian on the surface for mere suspicions. But losing an important prisoner is something He Xia would certainly use as an excuse to deal with him. Qing Tian will perhaps have to invest in us then."

Moran asked, "Who is this important prisoner? Why does he matter?"

"Does Bei Mo's Main General Ze Yin matter?"

The crowd was utterly shocked.

"Where is he?"

Fanlu looked rather lazy and actually yawned. He pointed at the hillside behind, "I hid him and came to talk to the Duke first. You two were once enemies in the battlefield, but don't fight the moment you see each other. I exchanged him for my life."

Chu Beijie was delighted. He softly roared, and the dozen people began charging toward the hillside behind them.

## Chapter 72

But Qing Tian's situation was even more dire than expected.

Ever since He Xia gained large amounts of power, his attitude to these minor Yun Chang generals who worked tirelessly behind the scenes gradually changed. Although his rewards didn't stop, the feeling rusted away. Qing Tian was quite intelligent himself, so there was no way he couldn't tell He Xia was putting all his energy into raising his own men. Promoting Cui Linjian as the main commander of the Ganfeng Regiment was a perfect example.

This meant that if he were to establish a new country in the future, it would not be centred around Yun Chang.

It seemed to mean that all citizens from four countries would be equal.

To the people of Yun Chang, this wasn't good.

When Chu Beijie secretly visited late that night, Qing Tian was intensely distressed about He Xia. Qing Tian didn't really know why Chu Beijie seemed to appear like a heavenly god before his eyes or why he didn't call for his bodyguards either.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, who had been missing for so long, seemed to become a dazzling folk myth. He Xia's arch enemy suddenly, unbelievably appeared before his very eyes and was trying to persuade him. This was something Qing Tian had never thought possible.

Chu Beijie's words couldn't be said to be without truth.

"General Qing has personally witnessed the methods He Xia used to deal with the Gui family. The Gui family was ruined in his hands as well as the Royal House of Yun Chang. There's no guarantee General Qing will survive and not be ruined in his hands either. As a son of a prominent family, does General Qing not want to the future generations to survive?"

Qing Tian had solemnly replied, "Don't you dare try to sow discord. I haven't done anything disrespectful to the Marquess of Jing-An, so how could he do anything to me?"

Chu Beijie saw his indignance. His smile became even deeper. "Then what did Yaotian do that was disrespectful to him?"

Qing Tian's body shook slightly, "The Princess died while giving birth."

He thought Chu Beijie would continue sowing discord, but he didn't expect Chu Beijie would sigh softly. "If that's what General Qing thinks, then what can I do? Heroic men should always die a valiant death on the battlefield, so how could Gui Changning possibly rest in peace after dying such a death?"

He was wearing clothes suited for lurking in the night, but he gave others a just and rightful feeling. In comparison to the romantic He Xia, this man had a bit more heroic courage.

Qing Tian watched him leave, his hand pressed against the hilt of his sword.

Chu Beijie visited him late at night, yet did not attack him. If this different treatment to Cui Linjian was made known to He Xia, it was certain his suspicions towards him would increase.

After hesitating for a few moments, he finally decided not to summon his bodyguards inside.

The thought of the current suspicion between major generals was really quite chilling.

General Qing Tian stiffly considered his way through the night. Dawn had yet to brighten the sky when a bodyguard stumbled inside to report, "General, not good, the prisoner in the water dungeon has escaped!"

“What?” The sleepless Qing Tian abruptly sat out of bed, his eyes as wide as bells. He urged, “How did he escape? Has anyone been sent to catch him?”

“He seems to have escaped by going underneath the water. The metal bars were loosened, and no one knows how he managed to open the prison door. General, should we immediately report to the Marquess of Jing-An?”

Qing Tian was dazed for a few moments before solemnly answering, “Not a whisper about this is to be leaked. All of you must guard your mouths. I have some plans of my own.” He dismissed the bodyguard and got up to change. Sitting or standing didn’t feel right; he could only blindly worry. When on an outing, he didn’t care how much blood he lost, but the work due to his rank during a war at standstill was always a pain.

Sigh, when it rains, it pours indeed.

The Royal Residence of Gui Le.

On the grand hall, Dongzhuo was currently in the middle of his report to He Xia. “The spies have found Ruo Han’s traces in Bei Mo. He appears to still be recruiting in secret.”

“Ruo Han?” He Xia waved his hands dismissively, “Just let him slowly recruit. I want to get all the rebels together anyway, so it’s easy to get rid of them in one go. Don’t worry, I have my own plans to deal with Ruo Han.”

He Xia had yet to learn of Ze Yin’s rescue.

He had numerous benefits of keeping Ze Yin alive back then. This Main General’s effect on the Bei Mo army was equivalent to Chu Beijie’s effect on Dong Lin, so he kept him alive to prevent the remnants of Bei Mo rebelling in the future.

How could the Bei Mo rebel forces not lose their morale when they charge their sharp swords pressed forwards and suddenly find their most beloved, respected Main General Ze Yin, thought to be long dead, appear before them?

Important things had to be hoarded until used at an important time. This was the one value He Xia always upheld when setting down his strategies.

“Qing Tian’s report has just arrived. He said he didn’t disobey military orders. It is because his troops caught a strange illness recently, and every soldier has been feeling weak in their limbs. Their body itches...”

“Hmph,” He Xia sneered, “So shameful, to say such a ludicrous excuse. Since it’s an illness, has the name of it been confirmed?”

Dongzhuo was earnest in personality and honestly replied, “Qing Tian doesn’t seem to mean it as an excuse. I’ve been getting other news at the same time, all saying that several of Yun Chang’s army camps have gotten the same symptoms. We worried if it was the plague, but fortunately the soldiers weren’t too ill, so no one died.”

At these words, He Xia’s attention was caught, “Has the food supplies been examined?”

“Yes, they have been examined. There’s no problem with them at all. It seems the problem isn’t with the food.”

He Xia coldly smiled, “It’s even more suspicious if the tests came out negative. Have you forgotten who is on Chu Beijie’s side? It’s not the problem of the food supplies of a single army camp but several all over the country. How dare they sneak in my Yun Chang’s territory.”

Dongzhuo knew he meant Pingting. His heart was startled. He frowned, "It's not easy to tamper with military food supplies that way, so I think it's impossible. Unless they have enough skill to sneak into Zuxi and tamper over there?"

The other officials in the main hall, especially the military ones, all quietly nodded in agreement.

He Xia knew Dongzhuo was right and thought for a bit. His expression changed slightly. He raised his voice, "Bring the map!" After pushing open the map and carefully studying it, He Xia's hand pointed at the map. He exclaimed, "They really are good thinkers to think of something like this."

The crowd was below the. They craned their necks as they could not see where on earth He Xia was pointing on the map. They then heard He Xia suddenly ask, "Who is the Governor of Qierou right now?"

Someone hurriedly checked the list of officials, reporting, "It's Fanlu."

He Xia heard this and knew he was one of Gui Changqing's men, confirming his suspicions even more. He rolled up the map and solemnly said, "I bet Chu Beijie is currently in Yun Chang. Immediately make preparations to leave, I will personally lead troops back to Yun Chang."

His forte was leading troops and never once be defeated. When he mentioned he was going to lead troops, his expression was very firm and resolute. Even if the people below him were doubtful, they didn't dare advise him. They all answered with a loud 'yes'.

The generals all knew there was a battle to fight, meaning there was accomplishment to gain so they approved of it even more. They began to feel very excited.

He Xia turned to Fei Zhaoxing, "Zhaoxing, I'm worried about Gui Le. You deal with things appropriately, so I'll leave you here to take care of things here. There was originally a group of elite soldiers to govern the city here, and they will now be allocated to you. As for the Weibei Regiment and the other people, come with me on this expedition."

Fei Zhaoxing's heart froze.

In a few words, He Xia managed to strip him away of his military power and even transferred the several generals he'd finally managed to win the hearts of. Didn't it mean almost certain death if He Xia left a secret Order to deal with him while he left?

Fei Zhaoxing secretly clenched his fist, but his expression didn't change at all. "Yes."

He Xia watched him use the seal and transfer the rights to command the Weibei Regiment right there and then. He nodded, "Everyone can go prepare. We shall leave in three hours from the rear city gates."

The crowd thundered 'yes' and immediately scattered.

Fei Zhaoxing left the Royal Residence gates alone. He suddenly heard someone yell from behind. "General Fei, please wait."

He turned to see He Xia's chief bodyguard hurrying towards him with around four guards. He smiled as he spoke to Fei Zhaoxing, "The Marquess of Jing-An has instructed to let general take command of the soldiers guarding the city. I have been ordered to bring you to meet them."

His expression was very natural, thinking there would be no trouble. He didn't expect Fei Zhaoxing to be cleverer than the average person nor that he had long been suspicious of He Xia.

Fei Zhaoxing's gaze didn't move. He just saw the guards behind submissively bow. There was no way he didn't understand if he made the slightest movement, these guards would pull out their swords. He chuckled secretly in his heart as it seemed He Xia had already commanded his subordinates to capture him when no one was around and deal with him in the future. Fei Zhaoxing revealed a pleasant smile, "Fine, thank you brothers for taking the time to accompany me."

Each of them got on their own horses and just turned the corner when Fei Zhaoxing unsheathed his sword, stabbing the chief of the guards right in the heart.

There was no way the other person expected Fei Zhaoxing to be the first one to attack. He cried in pain before falling off his horse.

Fei Zhaoxing gathered his reigns, turned his horse, and ran. The remaining people watched him leave before suddenly jolted awake, cursing as they gave chase. He Xia happened to be setting his Order at that moment with his men outside the gates, preparing to leave so the gates were wide open. Fei Zhaoxing's military uniform were bounded off of him. The soldiers guarding the city hurriedly kowtowed to him. They had yet to stand back up before Fei Zhaoxing and his horse disappeared like the wind.

He Xia received the news and was instantly furious, "How could you not complete such an easy task?"

But the army immediately departed anyway. He Xia left a lieutenant to pursue Fei Zhaoxing and deal with Gui Le's affairs by himself. The lieutenant dressed into his military uniform and rushed inside the gates.

In Qierou City, the echoes of laughter thanks to Ze Yin's safe returned had yet to end.

Chu Beijie and Ze Yin were enemies on the battlefield once, but for Yangfeng and Pingting, as well as the chaos under the skies, they finally became people of the same path.

"Sigh, I just want to see my son a little."

"Me too."

The two famous generals couldn't help moan and groan at the mention of their sons.

Ze Yin said, "You're a bit better off than me, having Miss Bai at your side. It's a pity Yangfeng and Qing'er still don't know whether I'm safe right now, and I don't know what terrible, upset state they are in thanks to that."

Pingting happened to come in from outside. She stifled her laughter with a hand, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Yangfeng has been upset for a long time, so when she sees you, her heart will rejoice."

Chu Beijie was an experienced man and understood Ze Yin's feelings better. He softly comforted, "It can't be helped. Dong Lin's military power is pathetically little, so it's better not to let the Yun Chang army notice them. To ensure confidentiality, we can only try not to pass on messages to them."

At this mention, Fanlu held Zuiju as he came in. At the sight of Chu Beijie, he asked, "Duke, when will you go see Qing Tian again?"

"He won't be able to interact with He Xia at all thanks to my escape, so he is definitely feeling restless. When the fish has had enough of the heat in the frypan, it will definitely jump out onto the table." Ze Yin laughed.

Chu Beijie also had such plans and simply called everyone over. "Without further ado, we will go see Qing Tian again." This time Moran and Ze Yin were to go, while Fanlu would stay to guard Qierou.



Fanlu was a bit frustrated. He only knocked out two mere soldiers last time, not killing anyone. His hands itched, but he didn't expect that he wouldn't be able to go this time.

Zuiju stroked his chest. "Very good, very good. The monkey is locked up in his cage." She narrowed her eyes at Fanlu.

Zuiju was very happy Chu Beijie didn't let Fanlu go on a risky adventure.

The crowd departed like last time. When sending him off, Pingting said to Chu Beijie, "Hurry back, Duke. I keep on feeling a little jumpy."

Chu Beijie smiled gently, "When we're apart, my heart always feels a bit uneasy. Don't worry, I will be back soon." He softly kissed her cheek, and Pingting closed her eyes, accepting it submissively.

Fanlu was on one side, smiling as he said to Zuiju, "Look at her, so obedient. Last time when I left, I said I'll help touch your wound..." He had yet to finish, when he cried out in pain, obviously punched by Zuiju.

This expedition was different from last time as they left early in the morning. When they arrived at the Shuitai Regiment camp, it was still morning. Chu Beijie and the other generals were undoubtedly masters of sneaking and hiding. They would hide wherever there was brick. This place had many more hiding spots compared to normal camps. Qing Tian's courtyard was very quiet, and no one was seen, appearing to have all been dismissed by Qing Tian.

Chu Beijie studied the situation and had confidence more or less. He didn't bother hiding his figure and simply strode inside.

Qing Tian was inside his room, frowning. When a light flashed in the corners of his eyes, he hurriedly turned to see Chu Beijie standing in front of him who calmly smiled, "Has General Qing made his decision? I have returned to hear the decision."

Qing Tian solemnly replied, "Was Ze Yin rescued by the Duke of Zhen-Bei?"

Chu Beijie smiled and didn't answer.

"Do you know with just the raise of my voice, you will die a meaningless death?" Qing Tian lowered his voice.

Although Chu Beijie was still smiling, his expression sharpened considerably. Their gazes locked into each other for a long time until he answered with a question, "Then why does General Qing not raise his voice?"

His gestures had the royal air that pressed down others.

Qing Tian stared at him for a long time before softening to a deep sigh, "I've thought a lot, these days..."

There were two opened letters on the table. He picked one of them and handed it to Chu Beijie. "I am, in the end, a person of the army, therefore I hate rebels the most. I originally made up my mind that if Duke came again, no matter what, I would make Duke stay behind even at the cost of my life. What importance is life when it comes to loyalty? Look at this Duke, if it hadn't been for this letter that arrived just now, I'm afraid the sight of Duke would have me summon other people."

Chu Beijie took it, lowering his head to read the inscription. The three characters for Fei Zhaoxing's name were on it. They were scribbled, apparently hastily written.

“Isn’t this Fei Zhaoxing one of He Xia’s trusted generals?”

“Correct, this has Fei Zhaoxing’s seal, so it can’t be faked.” Qing Tian nodded, his expression suddenly revealing an unspeakably indignant heartache. “In this letter, he describes how He Xia...how He Xia harmed our Yun Chang’s Princess.” His voice was a little hoarse.

Chu Beijie suddenly understood.

His heart secretly wondered how this was such a clever coincidence, so he read the letter carefully. Although Fei Zhaoxing was currently on the run, his narrative was not cluttered. He went into depth about how He Xia imprisoned Yaotian and forced Yaotian to her death. Every scene was so saturated in description that even an outsider like himself felt that it was unbearable to read, not to mention a general who had been loyal to the Yun Chang Royal House for several years.

If Fei Zhaoxing wrote this letter around ten times, handed it to all of Yun Chang’s generals, then He Xia would be very unfavoured. But why did Fei Zhaoxing suddenly decide to betray He Xia to even such a violent method?

Qingtian waited until he was finished with Fei Zhaoxing’s letter before he suddenly asking, “Did Duke of Zhen-Bei come out from Qierou?”

At the mention of Qierou, even the experienced Chu Beijie couldn’t help jolt. He urged, “How does General Qing know?”

Qing Tian picked up the other letter on the table and handed it to him, “There’s another letter which arrived around the same time as Fei Zhaoxing’s. He Xia wants me to immediately depart, lead troops to surround Qierou. Hmph, I just want to lead troops to confront him and beat him to pieces!”

Chu Beijie almost snatched the letter off his hands. He hurriedly skimmed a few lines, his expression changing immensely. “Dammit!”

He Xia was leading troops to siege Qierou, yet Chu Beijie left Pingting and the others in Qierou.

Chu Beijie’s mind was a mess. His actions were quiet. He asked Qing Tian, “Can General lead the Shuitai Regiment against He Xia? What will you do if your subordinates report you’re rebelling?”

Qing Tian vaguely knew something was going to happen. He bluntly said, “The Shuitai Regiment are all sons of Yun Chang. As long as I read through Fei Zhaoxing’s letter, I can guarantee not one will want to follow He Xia. To be honest, ever since Dong Lin, Bei Mo and Gui Le were conquered, my Yun Chang’s brothers have been getting increasingly worthless.”

“Good!” Chu Beijie said, “Then please General, immediately come with me to Qierou and stop He Xia.”

“Of course I want to immediately go to Qierou to fight against He Xia, but hatefully my men are suffering from a strange illness. All of the soldiers have been feeling weak in the limbs and can’t even climb on their horses.”

Because Chu Beijie needed Qing Tian’s cooperation, he had long asked Pingting to make preparations. He hurriedly said, “Don’t worry about that, I have brought the antidotes with me. Dissolve it in water and give a small amount for everyone to drink. They will immediately feel better.” He patted the bag on his back.

Qing Tian’s mouth dropped opened, realisation dawning.

“There’s one more thing.” Qingtian frowned. “It’s not that I underestimate Duke’s power, but He Xia isn’t a normal person. He’s leading two regiments over so my Shuitai Regiment only has half of his power. I’m afraid we will be no

opponent for them. Also, when the two armies clash, it'll be very difficult to determine friend or foe as the opponent also has many sons of Yun Chang.”

Chu Beijie thought of Pingting and was very anxious. His hand pressed on the hilt of the Divine Spirit sword was drenched in cold sweat, but he knew Qing Tian was right. He thought for a few moments, asking Qing Tian, “Apart from the Ganfeng Regiment, is the Yongxiao Regiment also nearby?”

“Correct, the Yongxiao Regiment was completely annihilated by Dong Lin and is now made up of remnants of soldiers from the fallen countries.”

“Where do most of them come from?”

Qing Tian praised how quickly he thought. He replied, “People from Gui Le are few, most of them are prisoners of war from Bei Mo and Dong Lin. He Xia is afraid they may not be convinced so deliberately put them in preferential treatment. Their supplies is twice the amount of normal soldiers. Although their commander, Chang Liang, is from Yun Chang, he is very loyal to He Xia. Even if he reads Fei Zhaoxing’s letter, he may not hate He Xia as much as me.”

Chu Beijie laughed for a few moments. “So what’s there to be afraid of?” He walked to the entrance, lowering his voice, “Come over here, all of you.”

The several generals hiding in ambush heard his summon and knew the big matter was complete. They all went inside.

Time was urgent. Chu Beijie rapidly arranged, “He Xia is currently taking two regiments to attack Qierou and can arrive at any time. General Qing Tian and I will immediately lead the Shuitai Regiment back to Qierou. The Yongxiao Regiment is approximately thirty miles in the north. Their commander is Chang Liang, a confidant of He Xia, but most of the soldiers are Dong Lin and Bei Mo people. Ze Yin and Moran, I want you two to go. Regardless of whatever things you do, kill Chang Liang and get the Yongxiao Regiment for me.”

Everyone was surprised from hearing of He Xia attacking Qierou. Ze Yin. Moran knew they held great responsibility and didn’t dare neglect it in the slightest. They received Chu Beijie’s orders and turned away.

Chu Beijie took a deep breath and looked at Qing Tian, “General Qing, let us go avenge Princess Yaotian.”

*Pingting, you have to safely wait until I return.*

## Chapter 73

The sudden rumbling in the air travelled into Fanlu’s ears.

“Strange,” Fanlu looked up, staring at the small black spot in the sky, “This kind of circling is typically a result of breeding falcons. Why would it suddenly fly over us?”

Pingting followed his gaze and looked up. She clearly saw the rather restless falcon high up in the sky and frowned, “When the Duke came to Qierou, he arranged a small squad to stay behind at the border between Yun Chang and Bei Mo to keep an eye out on enemy movement. Their captain owned an old falcon. Could that be his? Why did he fly here?” Hearing the falcon’s unceasing caws, it seemed that there was something urgent. She hurried into the room and grabbed the falcon bell Chu Beijie left behind. She shook it, and the sound of bells were heard continuously under the

This bell was one the falcon's owner gave to Chu Beijie specifically to pass on messages. When the falcon heard the bell sound, it would know it had found the right place. With another long caw, it plummeted down.

Fanlu's eyes were quick. He snatched the bell from Pingting's hand and threw it onto the stone table. That falcon was already in sight and considerately sheathed its wings. It firmly stopped on the stone table, grasping tightly onto the bell.

There was a small piece of cloth wrapped near the bell. Fanlu reached out to take it.

Zuiju was standing at a distance, urging, "Be careful you don't get pecked at!"

Her words had yet to fall when the cloth was already in Fanlu's hands. Fanlu smiled, "This falcon is more considerate than you. It won't randomly peck at other people. Let me see the news it brings." He opened the cloth, his expression suddenly changing.

Fanlu had interacted with him for a long time, but this was the first time she'd seen such an ugly expression on his face. She hurriedly asked, "What's wrong?"

"He Xia has already led two regiments to attack Qierou."

"Ah!" Zuiju cried in panic, hurriedly muffling her mouth with her hand. She looked at Pingting.

At Fanlu's words, Pingting's face was drained of colour. She too, abruptly stood up, her body shaking to and fro for a bit. She asked, "Which two regiments? When will they arrive in Qierou?"

Fanlu bitterly smiled, "How do I know? The cloth only says that much. But looking at this sloppy writing, the situation must be very urgent."

Zuiju urged, "He Xia's arrival will be terrible. Has Miss got any good plans? Oh gosh, why did the Duke choose today to leave?"

Pingting shook her head, "It's good that he left today." Her voice trailed off in the end.

Fanlu gravely said, "You must immediately leave. I will withstand here and try to detain He Xia as long as possible."

His expression showed the colour of rare generosity.

Zuiju was in extreme panic and almost cried out.

Pingting thought for a few moments, abruptly raising her head. She made her choice right there, "Complete withdrawal immediately. If he is rushing towards Qierou, then he must know everything already. His sword will come down on you without waiting for a single word."

Huo Yunan and the others hurriedly arrived. Hearing Pingting's words, Huo Yunan asked, "It can't be that dire, could it? The falcon is much faster than the army, so there should still be time. We can wait until the Duke returns, so the planning can be more assured."

Pingting resolutely shook her head. "No, we must immediately pull out of Qierou. Fanlu, you think of a way to reach out to all of our people in the city. No need to assemble, we must immediately leave the city and flee in the direction of the Shuitai Regiment."

Fanlu frowned, "We still don't know whether Qing Tian's side is going well. What if he refuses to join us and leads his troops to support He Xia. If we bump into the Shuitai Regiment on the way, won't that be falling right into our deaths?"

Pingting sighed, "He Xia is leading two whole regiments here, while we only have a mere thousand. If the Duke can't successfully win the Shuitai Regiment in time, our deaths are certain. If the Shuitai Regiment joins the Duke and we can meet up with them, then we still have a chance at living."

She understood the situation well, and her few words were enough to portray a thorough analysis. The people immediately saw the situation before them was very grim, and their hearts sank. They didn't even bother packing up their luggage. They were ready to leave immediately.

Fanlu summoned several of his residence's cabinet officers. He gave each of them a large amount of silver coins, affably instructing, "Today, I have a task for you to complete. Each of you are to write ten announcements and post them in conspicuous places throughout the city. Complete this in half an hour, and I will then reward more silver to each of you."

These cabinet officers never once held so much silver in their hands. They felt almost disorientated by their good fortune and bowed deeply. "What does Sir want us to announce? We will definitely write it beautifully."

Fanlu's eyebrows droop, "What rubbish! Who told you to write it beautifully? Quick, it must be done quick! On them, write the words—Hurry! Scram, go east! Just those four words and don't ask what it means. Just do as I've instructed. Listen clearly, it must be completed in half an hour!"

Once his cabinet officers were shooed away, he hurriedly went out the back door. Zuiju and the others had brought the horses from the best stables. When she saw Fanlu, she immediately tossed some reins at him. Fanlu got on the horse and raised his voice, "Let's go!"

The sound of hooves instantly thundered. The group of people rushed towards the city gates. The market was not active today, so the city gates closed earlier than usual. When Fanlu got to the foot of the city gates, he raised his head and shouted, "Open the gates! Hurry up and open the gates for me!"

When the city guards saw their governor yelling at them to open the gates, they immediately panicked and opened it. At that moment, the effect of the announcements of the cabinet officers seemed to kick in as many more people streamed out from inside the city on horses. These people were all Chu Beijie's subordinates who snuck into Qierou, lying in wait. When the city gates opened, more than one hundred people had already materialised.

The city gates opened with a clack, revealing a gap that only allowed one person to open. Fanlu's horse went out first but when he was just about to bolt outside, he was greeted by a sharp arrow breaking the wind. Fanlu's head tilted to one side, the arrow flying past his face. With a thwack, it lodged itself on the gates.

Zuiju said, "Not good, they're already here. Hurry up and close the door. Maybe we might be able to get some time."

"No." Pingting calmly said, "That was a hastily shot arrow, as they cannot fully eat us. While they're still in the middle of their encirclement, we must go out fast. Fortunately, we are a bit faster than He Xia." She smiled slightly.

At such a critical moment, her smile was even brighter than a shooting star.

Seeing her like that, everyone's worries were unknowingly put to rest, their courage becoming stronger.

There had always been several thick shields of the soldiers guarding the city and Fanlu picked one up. He raised his voice, "Let's charge!"

His limbs jolted as he bolted once more.

There were more arrows flying this time. They came in waves but as they were hastily done, they weren't like the rows of strong arrows filling the sky on the battlefield. This meant Pingting was right, and Fanlu was secretly delighted since they were only tiny squads that arrived. He raised his shield, blocking off the arrows one by one. By then, the city gates were fully opened, and the people behind Fanlu followed suite, getting a thick shield to protect their body. Those who didn't have shields hid behind those who did and small battle arrays were formed, tightly surrounding Pingting, Zuiju and Huo Yunan, as they collectively fought their way out.

They frantically crossed the huge empty space in front and could already see their enemies. They seemed to reach the outskirts of Qierou city, only amounting to one hundred men or so. They didn't have any more people than Pingting and the others had. Most of them were archers anyhow.

Fanlu shouted, threw away his thick sword, and pulled out his long sword from his waist. He started stabbing the moment he withdrew his weapon. The people behind him had also arrived. All of them were elites Chu Beijie carefully chose so all of sudden the glints of swords appeared. War began.

Fanlu's swordsmanship wasn't particularly good, but he was very fast and his opponents weren't particularly good swordsmen either. There were several continuous screams before a few enemies tumbled off their horses, bloodsoaked.

Pingting was afraid he'd be hurt and urged, "Fanlu, don't try to fight. Run!"

Fanlu knew her good intentions, but he knew that despite the archers being cowards up close, if they ran, it wouldn't be funny when they shoot from behind. He shouted, "You go run, I'll butcher these people before catching up."

He just finished dealing with an enemy who flung away.

Wuuu!!

The sound of a horn began to vibrate. Although it was low and somewhat far away, it seemed to be right next to everyone's ear, its vibration directly jolting into their hearts.

Pingting paled and said, "Damn! The army has arrived! Scram!"

Everyone knew He Xia had arrived, and their hearts went cold. About ninety percent of these early squads were killed. They gathered their reins and bolted for the east. Pingting brought the whip down to reach full speed. She then had time to look back, seeing a thick dust rolling in the distance behind them. Tens of thousands of soldiers were treading through the earth towards them.

"Kill!"

The battle cries were truly earth shattering. They were catching up to them from behind.

Master, Master had caught up...

No, it was He Xia.

The He Xia who killed Yaotian. The He Xia who killed the King of Bei Mo. The He Xia who killed the Royal House of Gui Le.

The earth was about to be pierced by the thudding.

The wind howled, and the sand lunged. The waves of raining burst out with successive whooshes, causing the several powerful men tightly protecting around Pingting to fall off their horses.

Zuiju cried in panic.

Pingting shouted, "Don't look! Run forwards!" She fiercely slapped Zuiju's horse.

Every time the rain of arrows fell, there were always a number of guards falling down. Every drop of blood that was lost became the way to survival for the remaining people.

The horses that were struck screamed and hung around the corpse of their dead master. They were too frightened to gallop on and would eventually fall under the never-ending array of arrows.

The horn's rumble seemed to extend from the ends of the world, tearing at the people's heart and lungs.

The arrows behind them fell like pouring rain, and the condition was brutally fierce. Only a dozen people remained to guard Pingting, compared to the hundred at the beginning. They have yet to reach the small hill before their eyes.

But it seemed like the hooves that came from hell, getting closer and closer towards them.

Fresh blood constantly splattered near Pingting as the guards were struck by the sharp arrows. The hot liquid would draw numerous beautiful arcs in the air.

Why?

Marquess of Jing-An, why?

How many souls have you buried between heaven and earth? Where is your gentleness, your romanticness, and your carefree smile of the past buried?

For what reason are you seizing these blood-filled mountains and rivers?

The wind stung at her eyes. The warm blood and apathetic world mixed into a strangely beautiful landscape. Pingting was in the midst of it, letting her tears mix into her sight.

Bei Mo, Dong Lin, Gui Le, Yun Chang...

He Su, Gui Changqing, Princess Yaotian...

How much fresh blood was fed to this country, to give birth to such breathtaking mountains and rivers?

"Ah..." A muffled sound came from behind again.

The sound of a person falling was heard, another passionate man to forever remain on this patch of land.

It was only a while before only four or five people remained behind Pingting.

Huo Yunan was the oldest, so Zuiju arranged the best horse for him. He didn't fall behind the whole way. When Zuiju saw her Teacher was at the front, she was more at ease.

Fanlu was protecting Zuiju and Huo Yunan at first, but was terribly afraid Pingting would be harmed this time. He had fell beside Pingting from the front, murmuring, "I'll protect you."

Pingting shook her head, "Protect Zuiju." Fanlu gave her look and Pingting raised her hand, whipping down on Fanlu's left arm. She viciously said, "Protect Zuiju!"

At such a delay, the pursuing soldiers behind them got even closer. It felt like they were the tiny prey of crazed wolves.

They suddenly heard a gasp from Zuiju. The horse she was on had been struck. It painfully treaded forward a bit before abruptly rearing up. Zuiju didn't hold on tightly enough and slid right off the horse's back. She didn't land though for Fanlu had already rushed forwards and gathered her in his arms.

Several arrows continuously came and Fanlu protected Zuiju with one hand while the other waved around his sword, knocking away the arrows heading towards Zuiju. He suddenly felt an immense pain on his back and knew he had been hit. He was afraid Zuiju would worry, so he clenched his teeth and didn't make a sound of pain. He simply surged forwards again.

At that moment, the final guard protecting Pingting fell off his horse.

The situation was hopeless.

The pursuers from behind were gradually getting closer, and the one at the very front was He Xia in his red robe. The desperately escaping squad had been in formation, but his archers mowed them down, leaving a meagre number of survivors.

When the final guard fell, a familiar slender figure suddenly jumped into the corners of his eyes.

At that very moment, He Xia's heart felt like it was tumbling.

Tumbling rapidly at high frequency, at violent amplitudes.

His mother carried in a young girl, smiling as she treaded through the snow.

"Look, what a liable baby girl. Her fate must be connected to the House of Jing-An."

"Xia'er, do you know what is fate?"

No.

No!

What fate? Where was the House of Jing-An?

Where had the Marquess of Jing-An gone too?

He suddenly came back to his sense, only to realise that only an instant had passed. But the raining arrows weren't there as the archers have stopped, waiting for his next command. "Why aren't you shooting, who told you to stop?" He Xia thundered in anger.

He grabbed a large bow from one of his guards and clipped the bow onto the string, aiming at the front.

One of the people beside him pounced forwards, yelling, "Stop!" But He Xia was too fast and the arrow spun out of his hands once loosened. The loud sound of an arrow piercing the wind was heard.



The sharp arrowhead sliced the air, crossing the dampened bloody ground between the two forces, carrying the light sound of the wind with it.

The arrow left its string.

He shot it; he personally shot it.

He Xia watched that arrow fly forward, and although it was a short moment, time seemed to stop there. The fingers that shot the arrow felt numb. He felt a sort of emptiness like they didn't belong to him. It felt like it wasn't his heart either, but an ocean that could not accommodate his desolation that would severely hurt his limbs.

"For the last few years, we studied and played together, even learned how to fight and deal with horses together."

"But I'm only an older brother to you, and you're only a younger sister to me."

"Back then, who said they wanted to find the best possible husband or else they would rather never marry and die a long death?"

But, it couldn't be Chu Beijie...

Why, why did it have to be Chu Beijie?

That arrow directly flew towards Pingting's back. Due to not having enough strength, it had already been weakened considerably by the time it reached her. Zuiju happened to be able to see it due to being in Fanlu's arms. She was almost scared soulless. She hoarsely shouted, "Duck!"

Pingting heard this and ducked forward without hesitation. A cold arrow roared past her back.

She too, broke into cold sweat.

He Xia saw Pingting hadn't been hit from afar. His heart slowed a bit, followed by intense rage. He brutally whipped down on Dongzhuo, yelling, "How dare you!"

"Master, that's Pingting! That's Pingting!" Dongzhuo pounced forwards, only hugging his thigh hanging on the girth. He promptly burst into tears.

He Xia raised his whip but lost some of his will to bring it back then. He looked up and saw Pingting and the others had pulled some distance away from the army again. He Xia's foot twitched, kicking Dongzhuo aside. His voice was very cold, "I'll punish you when I get back." He unsheathed his sword, "Don't shoot, just continue chasing! Catch them alive!"

The army thundered 'yes' as the earth-shattering sound of hooves began to rumble again.

Pingting and the others had no strength to run on. No matter how much they brought down their whips, their horses gradually slowed down. The thundering battle cries behind them were pressing on. The crowd could only grit their teeth, only hoping to get to the top of the hill.

Just as they reached the foot of the hill, Pingting's horse neighed in pain. The horse before her knelt down. Pingting fell to the ground, rolling twice. She raised her head, the dust from the ground she disturbed billowed in front of her. In that haze of yellow dust, there was a very familiar face.

He Xia, the Marquess of Jing-An, the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, the tyrant who poisoned the four countries.

Her Master...

The once handsome, romantic person of even more unripe brilliance, now had a pair of pained eyes.

A lonely kind of pain, unable to find a way out of its suffering.

It was a kind of endlessly suffering pain.

Pingting was caught off guard by her tumble, but now she met the pain in the eyes of the man she had grown up with.

Just a simple raise of her head was enough to startle her.

It seemed that everything was nothing but simple. This way of concluding such chaotic times was just about right.

At that thought, Pingting couldn't help faintly smile at him.

Ever since Pingting fell off her horse, He Xia's eyes never left her. When he saw her smile, it felt like he was captured by magic. It caused all of the noisy battle screams around him to stop, dissipating it to clouds in the breeze.

He Xia stopped his horse.

As his horse stopped, the army behind him all stopped one by one. After a while, all of the horses and men silenced. Although they were splashing blood and their battle cries filled the sky, they were surprisingly quiet all of the sudden.

The entire world silenced.

Is that you?

Is the person before me the person I know?

Or have we forgotten what we used to look like?

Perhaps there was a hint of breeze between them, striding across the space between He Xia and Pingting's gaze. It was like the autumn leavings falling onto the surface of the water, creating tiny circular ripples.

At this very short moment, sharp shouts pierced the quiet world.

"Pingting!" The deep, reassuring calls hid conquering confidence that rushed straight into everyone's eardrums.

A single man and horse suddenly appeared at the top of the hillside. He seemed like the incarnate of a god. Before anyone else could react, he rushed towards Pingting at lightning speed.

Those sharp features had the power and influence to pressure others.

His black cloak fluttered in the wind like a pair of wings flying in the breeze behind him.

Chu Beijie arrived.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei arrived.

He Xia's reaction was fast. At the sight of Chu Beijie, he slapped down on his horse towards Pingting. He unsheathed his sword but it had yet to reach Pingting when a bright white light flashed before his eyes. Chu Beijie's Divine Spirit silently flickered forward. He Xia hurriedly brought back his own sword to block

Clang!

The two peerlessly precious swords clashed, almost causing sparks to flicker. At that moment, tens of thousands of flags with the characters for “Shuitai” from another place began to rise. Numerous soldiers and generals surged out from the other side of the hill like the head of the tide of a flood.

Qing Tian rode directly under the commander’s flag. His eyes held hot tears as he drew his sword and yelled, “My brothers, follow me! He Xia killed the Princess!”

“He Xia killed the Princess!”

“Avenge the Princess! Kill!”

“Kill! Kill!”

The thousands of recovered elites shouted like angry beasts as they charged downwards. The two sides then hit each other like two surging floods, gradually integrating into a mass of red flesh and blood.

“Kill! Avenge! Avenge for the Princess!”

“He Xia killed the Princess!”

“The Princess!”

“Princess Yaotian!”

When He Xia saw the Shuitai Regiment appear behind Chu Beijie, he knew that it wasn’t good. He secretly cursed himself for not doing enough and not dealing with Qing Tian earlier. But it was already no use regretting at this stage as Chu Beijie’s Divine Spirit sword was like a shadow, piercing straight forward. When Chu Beijie saw Pingting on the ground, he became distressed and desperately fought. He Xia struggled to block several parries, causing several clangs, but he didn’t move even one step backward.

The soldiers around were in a mess, all desperately fighting.

In the glints of the swords, it was already impossible to distinguish anything.

This was the first time these two people confronted the other on the battlefield. The successive blows left their sword arms numbed. They couldn’t help pant as they studied each other, secretly sighing to themselves, No wonder he’s a famous general. It’s no exaggeration.

He Xia dodged a blow, smiling, “Duke of Zhen-Bei is skilled, to move one of my regiments. But I have two regiments here and so our numbers are twofold. Why would you think you’ll win?”

Chu Beijie didn’t drop his guard either. His sword sliced horizontally which skimmed past He Xia’s right shoulder. His face seemed rather relaxed. He smiled as he answered with a question instead, “Does Marquess of Jing-An even have any soldiers? Of these tens of thousands of warriors, how many would be willing to give up their lives for you?”

This remark stabbed right at the wound in He Xia’s heart. He heard the Shuitai Regiment yell out Yaotian’s name and his heart began to feel waves of stinging pain, not to mention Chu Beijie was now ridiculing him about it. He scowled and said, “Take this.” His sword sprang out, but it had yet to reach Chu Beijie when it suddenly changed direction, directly heading towards Pingting who had fell to one side.

“How dare you!” Chu Beijie fumed, flying towards to protect her.

The corners of He Xia’s mouth rose into a faint smile as his sword turned again, this time heading towards Chu Beijie’s throat. Chu Beijie suddenly saw the sword appear before his eyes, but he wasn’t afraid. His Divine Spirit sword, although late, went in to stab He Xia’s swordhand like lightning. Even if He Xia managed to stab him, he would lose his right hand. There was no way He Xia would accept that, so he rapidly pulled his sword away.

The two people rallied. Although it all happened in a blink of the eye, their lives were at stake hence they were panting. He Xia came from afar, so he had much less time to physically rest compared to Chu Beijie. If he couldn’t think of a plan, there was no way he would win.

He knew Chu Beijie cared about Pingting. If she was in trouble, he would disregard his own safety to protect her. He Xia therefore aimed at this fatal weakness and tried to attack Pingting.

Chu Beijie didn’t have many days of long distance travel, so he was in his peak state. He could protect Pingting in the chaotic battlefield, and his imposing manner was as steady as a mountain.

He Xia blocked a few more times and began to show some fatigue. Chu Beijie felt like he was winning, causing him to slacken a bit. He didn’t expect He Xia to coldly smile and suddenly pounce forwards, kicking Chu Beijie hard in the shin. His left hand rummaged a bit and stealthily pulled out a gleaming knife, striking towards Pingting who was behind Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie was dealing with the sword in his right hand when something flashed in the corners of his eyes, causing him to abruptly realise the knife in He Xia’s left hand. It was already too late to stop it as he urgently yelled, “Pingting!”

His heart sank.

Pingting had stayed behind Chu Beijie protectively and didn’t see the situation of his and He Xia’s parry. She happened to be craning her head too look when the knife blade appeared before her eyes. Her eyes followed the knife, looked up that hand, and looked right into the depths of He Xia’s eyes. Her expression was transparent and clear, no resentment at all.

A piece of He Xia’s heart felt like it was ripped off all of a sudden, causing his hands to unwittingly be slow. His expression was first lonely but then the twisted look of pain recovered.

“Master!” Pingting’s cry passed into his ear.

He Xia moved away a few steps and looked down to see himself. There was already a patch of fresh blood on his shoulders and chest. Only then did the severe pain began to spread.

Chu Beijie strode forwards until a figure beside them suddenly pounced forwards, blocking his way and started hacking. Chu Beijie readily blocked with his sword and was about to deal with this enemy in one go when Pingting suddenly rushed forwards to hug his arm, “No! Don’t kill Dongzhuo!”

Chu Beijie glanced at him and vaguely remembered the little brat that escaped from his Ducal Residence back then. He now wore the clothing of a general. He looked back at He Xia before getting back on his horse and heading into the fighting crowd.

He Xia endured the pain, riding away from Chu Beijie. He shouted, “Assemble! Listen to my orders, assemble in the west!”

It was He Xia's mistake to not expect Chu Beijie to suddenly lead troops out, but He Xia had lots more military power than him. As long as they assembled and organised themselves a bit, it wasn't hard to abolish the Shuitai Regiment.

Waves of pain swept from his chest and shoulder.

He Xia's men were uncomfortably fighting until they heard He Xia's orders. They passed on the message, "Assemble, west, in the west!"

They all collected themselves in the west.

The Shuitai Regiment had only recently recovered, not to mention they had two enemies to every one of them, so it was already a bit difficult for them to continue.

The two opposing troops gradually split into two flanks again.

Chu Beijie took advantage of this break to pull Pingting onto the horse. He hugged her, asking, "Are you hurt?"

Pingting seemed both hurt and not, but she shook her head anyway. She suddenly asked, "Is he hurt badly?"

Because He Xia had almost hurt Pingting, Chu Beijie hated He Xia so much he really wanted to hack him into thousands of pieces, but when he realised Pingting's expression held a bit of sadness, he could only vaguely answer, "I don't know. I hope he's hurt rather badly."

Qing Tian had also fought until he was soaked in blood. When he saw He Xia's men had assembled again, he knew the situation wasn't good. He hurriedly galloped out of the soldiers, asking Chu Beijie, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, what do we do? I'm afraid our troops won't last."

The corners of Chu Beijie's mouths lifted ever so slightly. He had yet to speak when the sound of the horn came again. This time, it came from the west. Each of the seven regiments of Yun Chang had their own specific kind of horn. Qingtian quietly listened, his eyebrows rising in delight, "It's the Yongxiao Regiment!"

He Xia also listened to the sound of the horn and was utterly shocked. "The Yongxiao Regiment?" He knew this regiment was mostly made up of people from Dong Lin and Bei Mo, impossible to use against Chu Beijie. That was why he didn't order them to help out on the siege of Qierou. Arriving when not summoned was certainly not good news.

In the west, smoke billowed.

He vaguely made out the shapes of fluttering flags, and soldiers gushing out from the dense forest in the west like a colony of ants. Ze Yin was in high spirits. He was riding at the very front, leading the others out. From far away, he shouted, "He Xia, do you still remember me, Ze Yin?"

When Ze Yin said this, the Bei Mo soldiers in the Yongxiao Regiment broke into thundering cheers.

Who was still willing to be He Xia's prisoner of war now that the general they likened to god appeared?

He Xia only just realised Ze Yin had escaped from his palm.

He Xia's generals were all in panic, and they had their heads turned to him, waiting for his orders. He Xia's expression wasn't alarmed at all. He was so calm and rippleless as he sat on the horse. From the distance, he seemed like he had become a stone statue.

Moran rode up beside Ze Yin, raising his voice, "Soldiers, today, General Ze Yin is here, and the Duke of Zhen-Bei is on the other side. Don't let go of He Xia!"

When the Dong Lin prisoners of war heard the Duke of Zhen-Bei's name, they were so crazily delighted that they shook the long spears as if their lives depended on it.

The earth thundered.

By this time, both sides had about the same military force. The Yongxiao Regiment and Shuitai Regiment respectively took the west and east of He Xia's troops. The south was Qierou City, leaving only the north unobstructed. The enemy had three famous generals, Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, Bei Mo's Ze Yin, Yun Chang's Qing Tian, and each of them were true warriors as well. On their side however, their only commander, the Marquess of Jing-An, was already been injured by Chu Beijie.

By then, even those who believed in He Xia the most couldn't help feel a bit of fear.

He Xia's hand clenched on the reins. Although his face was pale, his expression was surprisingly calm as his hand held his sword.

The lieutenant beside him lowered his voice, "Shall we kill and charge our way out?"

"Kill and charge?" At these words, He Xia's eyes rolled a little. He laughed faintly, "Look north."

The lieutenant turned to the northern direction. In the distance, he could see unusual movement. The soldiers were already in panic, but when they saw even more flags, they were immediately scared out of their wits. When the newcomers came a bit closer, the soldiers could see the hugest flag bore the words 'Ting Army'.

It appeared that while Ruo Han was hiding in Bei Mo, he received the news about He Xia leading his troops back to his country a bit quicker than Chu Beijie and the others. He knew the situation wasn't good and hurriedly led several thousands of men in the Ting army to rescue. They didn't rest at all in the last few days and nights, finally arriving at this moment.

And as a result, He Xia's army were suddenly surrounded, nowhere to run away.

Everyone looked scared.

The lieutenant urged, "Please make orders, Marquess of Jing-An. I'm afraid it won't be good if we're too late!"

It seemed that He Xia didn't hear him. He continued gazing at the fluttering flag in the distance. He mumbled, "Ting army...Ting army...so it was called Ting army." He was extremely intelligent and knew who had decided the name from at his first guess, as well as where it came from. Thinking of how he didn't actually slice down on Pingting in the end, his mouth revealed a very joyful smile. He then felt like the torn wounds in his heart became real, bringing a terrible pain. The injury Chu Beijie gave with just one slice of his sword could never be forcibly suppressed again.

He Xia slowly raised a hand to clutch onto his chest wound. A surge of hotness gushed through his fingertips.

Thud!

The Marquess of Jing-An, who conquered the four countries and was at the peak of his life, fell off his horse.

"Master! Master!" Dongzhuo violently pounced out from the crowd, kneeling by He Xia's side.

He had always been at one side, worrying about He Xia. He was afraid he would make He Xia angry again, causing his injury to worsen, so he didn't dare to come closer until now.

When he saw He Xia, he realised that all of the blood that covered him was his, his breathing already in wisps. Although Dongzhuo thought an increasingly sense of unfamiliarity to He Xia, he never once expected to see him in such a state.

"Master? Master!" He called a few times, but when He Xia didn't answer, Dongzhuo burst into pained tears.

With his tears, everyone knew the situation was hopeless.

Qierou City was behind them. They were surrounded by the other three directions. Not to mention, what were the odds when Chu Beijie was leading?

One person threw down the sword in their hand as a second followed suite.

The sounds of military swords falling onto the ground continued one after the other. Soon, all of He Xia's men released their hold on their swords.

Who would want to die, when they could live?

Chu Beijie, with Pingting, slowly rode over. They were followed by Qing Tian, the other generals, and soldiers. The surrendered soldiers automatically parted for them to pass through like a wide boat cutting through the surface of the water.

Pingting saw He Xia lying on the ground, covered in blood. Her eyes wavered a bit. She struggled to dismount before creeping forward. Chu Beijie was afraid He Xia wasn't dead yet, planning to harm her all of sudden. His eyes were locked onto her figure.

Dongzhuo was weeping in grief. When he saw a pair of embroidered shoes covered in dust, he looked up, tears in his eyes.

Pingting whispered, "Let me see, okay?"

Dongzhuo hesitated for a long time before finally going to one side.

Pingting slowly knelt down beside He Xia.

Under the blood of the setting sun, everything about reality seemed so cruel.

Her familiar face, ears, nose, mouth, hands that well-versed in appreciating the swordsmanship of Jing-An, and her familiar person was all quietly fading.

"Don't move, just stand here. I'll draw for you, it's going to be pretty."

That was the first thing He Xia had ever said to her.

Why did such a beautiful brush write such a desolate story?

Dear widely-acclaimed Marquess of Jing-An, the Marquess of Jing-An who almost became the master of the four countries, do you not feel any regret at all?

Like me, I regret the disappearance of innocent lives. I regret the blood that has flowed freely. I regret that I haven't clutched tightly enough to every little bit of invaluable happiness I once held.

"Master? Master?" Pingting stroked He Xia's face.

His handsome face, although dipped in blood, was still so pale.

He Xia's mouth moved slightly. He slowly opened his eyes, but they were unfocused. He seemed to feel Pingting's gentle hand stroking his cheek and managed to pull a faint smile, "You're here?"

Just these two words were already enough to bring Pingting's tears down like rain. She choked in reply, "I'm here, Master."

It seemed He Xia couldn't see anything. He just had blank eyes open. His breath paused a bit before he quietly replied, "Why are you calling me Master?" His voice was exceptionally gentle.

Pingting stiffened slightly.

He Xia's smile grew even more, as if using his entire life to smile. He suddenly spoke again, "Princess, Princess, look. I've brought the Queen's crown I promised..."

The Queen's Crown, I promised you the Queen's Crown. I have gotten the best craftsmen in the world, found the best jewels to create the Queen's Crown for my wife.

Look, I have already gotten the four countries and finally know what its greatest use is for. That is, to win one of your faint and reserved smiles, like that one you gifted to me when you lifted the bead curtain.

I will sword dance for you, pin flowers in your hair for you.

I remember your waterfall-like hair, alluring as if enveloped by clouds of mists.

I remember you liked me praising your slender hands, so beautiful and flawless.

My wife, you will be the noblest woman in the world so from thereon no one will ever dare bully you again.

I won't ever let you cry again in that tiny, dark room.

"The Queen's Crown, The Queen's Crown..." He Xia softly mumbled.

His blood-stained hands trembled, trying to pull out the Queen's Crown that didn't exist from his sleeves. He struggled for a long time, still unable to summon the strength to reach inside.

Pingting knelt by one side, tightly holding onto his hand. It felt like if she let go, she would never be able to catch his life from being swept away by the wind.

He Xia's empty eyes were shining with joy.

His lips still had the former elegant shape of the past, but it was just too pale, no hint of red. He struggled, gasping, "Princess, the Queen's Crown...the Queen's Crown..." He hesitated for a moment, his breath catching up when his eyes suddenly widened, and he raised his voice, asking, "Do you see it? See it?"

Pingting tightly covered her mouth with one hand, trying to hold back her tears. Her other hand held his rather cold hand. She choked out "I see. I see it."



He Xia deeply sighed in relief, his handsome face revealing a small smile. That was the gentle Marquess of Jing-An's smile in the past, like a spring breeze.

He had used all of his remaining strength and struggled free of Pingting's hand, slowly raising his hand. It seemed that he wanted to stroke the Princess's eyes, but when he reached out only halfway, he no longer had any energy to continue.

He Xia reached out, putting the last trace of his strength into his trembling fingertips.

It felt like the distance between his fingertips and Yaotian's gentle face was so far apart. He was willing to spend his entire lifetime to touch the other side.

But for him, his lifetime had already come to an end.

His fingertips shook and struggled for a long while before finally slumping down, limp.

Pingting was still kneeling. When He Xia closed his eyes for the final time, the final string she tucked away in the very depths of her heart felt like it had been gently broken by the sound of wind.

Dead. Master had died.

He was no longer the Marquess of Jing-An, no longer a famous general, no longer the demon king who'd poisoned the four countries. He was simply He Xia.

The He Xia who'd fallen in love with Yaotian, and the He Xia who had died while thinking of his wife.

Wealth and glory, life and death, power and fame, had nothing to do with him.

All sorts of past memories hurled towards her, but in the blink of an eye, everything seemed so empty and only thick darkness was left before her.

In the darkness, she felt like she saw He Xia's piercing expression again.

His expression had once been bright, one that held laughter but then it turned into a pair of pained eyes. Yet in the final moment when his sight was lost, during that moment when he tried to grope for that nonexistent Queen's Crown, happiness was mixed into them.

Her Master, at the very last moment before his death, knew his most beloved woman had once belonged to him, loved him.

It turned out he wasn't always lonely. His flower-like wife, the one who was also the master of Yun Chang, the one who secretly ordered his death, once accompanied him. She had had once listen qin, watched dances, and sung to him once.

When he got everything, when he lost everything, when he used his life to pay the price, he finally came to understand.

What part of those sweet words of tenderness, those gentle expressions, that joy and delight that could make his heart flutter were fake?

The fireworks cleared.

The past.

Pingting was exhausted from her erosive grief and felt her entire body go limp.

She fell into a warm embrace.

That was Chu Beijie's embrace.

Whenever, wherever, it would always make her heart feel at ease—

That embrace.

#### Chapter 74 (Finale)

The Marquess of Jing-An's fame was short-lived, his defeat at a small city disappeared along with the conventional monarchies.

Yun Chang had already lost their Royal House. Bei Mo and Gui Le were no different. The scattered troops had no leader, and after many years of war, the peasants were eager to live peaceful and harmonious lives.

The unification was already set in stone. What everyone needed was a king that the entire world recognised.

Who else was more qualified other than the Duke of Zhen-Bei to take on this important job?

What He Xia had spent his lifetime on, in the end, only became the achievement of his one and only rival.

“Knife-knife!”

“Sword!”

“Knife-knife!”

“Sword!” Ze Qing scratched his head helplessly, correcting Changxiao for the hundredth time.

Changxiao argued back for the hundredth time too. “Knife-knife!”

Ze Qing turned around and begged, “Godfather, Godfather, hurry and tell Changxiao this is a precious sword, not a knife.”

“You little fool. If he likes saying it's a knife, then let him say it's a knife. After all, names are created by people.” Fanlu's voice was loud as he lifted the curtain, swaggering inside with Zuiju. “Main General Ze Yin, I'm here today to drink a very important cup of tea.”

Zuiju narrowed her eyes at him, “Forget it, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“What do I have to be ashamed about? I'm a saviour.”

“What kind of saviour would force others to get their son to be his godson?”

Fanlu harrumphed, “What’s wrong with being my grandson? That Ze Qing kid sure has a great deal.”

Zuiju frowned, “Why does he have a great deal?”

“Isn’t getting a beautiful flower-like godmother for no reason a great deal?” This was something Zuiju couldn’t retort back at all.

The two kids watched amusedly as they bickered. Ze Yin was at one side, smiling as he watched.

Because of Ze Yin’s rescue, Yangfeng was exceptionally grateful to Fanlu and long discussed about getting Ze Qing to acknowledge him as his godfather. When she heard Fanlu had arrived, she immediately hurried to greet him and happened to hear Fanlu’s last words. She stood by the door, laughing softly, “Yes, that child Ze Qing really has got a great deal.”

At her words, everyone laughed.

Although Fanlu was a bit strange, he was on good terms with everyone. He took his acknowledgement in being a godfather as an official matter. He sent official invitations with a bit of a fanfare to several friends. When noon came, everyone all came through the door. Ruo Han was first to arrive, followed by Moran and Luo Shang and the others. In the end, even Chu Beijie turned up.

After He Xia’s death, everyone was busy dealing with the collapsed lifestyles of the countries. This was the first time they’d seen each other for a while hence after the ceremony was finished, they naturally didn’t disband immediately.

Fanlu obtained a few pots of good alcohol and opened all of them, allowing the scent of alcohol to escape into every corner.

When there was good alcohol, the place was naturally lively. Everyone had come from different places and began to chat, inevitably reaching the topic of He Xia. Huo Yunan drank a few sips of alcohol, suddenly sighing, “That situation was so difficult back then. Who would’ve thought He Xia would charge towards a mere Qierou? We were really, really lucky.”

Ze Yin asked, “Elder Doctor, why were we lucky?”

“If the Shuitai Regiment and Yongtai Regiment didn’t immediately follow the Duke’s uprising, wouldn’t that be terrible?”

Fanlu waved dismissively. “Sometimes three inches of snow aren’t done in just a single day of cold. Father-in-Law, war is always about the heart and mind. Although He Xia looked like he had great power, without a loyal morale in his troops, the seeds to defeat were actually and already be planted.

His words were justified. Ruo Han and the others all knew what war was like, and they all nodded to themselves.

Huo Yunan’s train of thought was much slower. “But back then at Qierou, it really was very dangerous. Look, two regiments were against two. Our side only had a few more thousand worth from the Ting army. That place was Yun Chang territory, and if the people nearby heard the Yun Chang army was locked in battle with another army, wouldn’t it have been terrible if the Ganfeng Regiment hurried over?”

Moran respectfully replied, “Elderly Doctor, the Gangfeng Regiment was different to the Shuitai and Yongxiao Regiments. They weren’t given the antidotes from the Duke, so their limbs were still strengthless. They couldn’t’ve rushed over.”

Ze Yin calmly added, "Even if they did rush over, I'm afraid they wouldn't help He Xia either. Most of the Ganfeng Regiment is also Yun Chang men. If they knew He Xia killed Yaotian, they would've definitely been furious."

Yangfeng reminded them, "You shouldn't call the Duke, 'the Duke', but the Emperor in the future."

Chu Beijie laughed, "If I can't talk to you when I become the Emperor in the future, I might as well not be the Emperor." He added honestly, "Back then, all I promised Pingting was to give her a cosy and peaceful home."

"If you don't properly manage with all your heart, how could the world possibly be at peace?"

Chu Beijie chuckled, suddenly thinking of something, "How is the Jing-An Ducal Residence right now?"

Everyone was quite concerned about this matter. Ruo Han's subordinates were in charge of this, so they all turned to Ruo Han.

Ruo Han spoke, "It's been going well. The peasants still have respect towards the House of Jing-An. It's just that He Xia...Well anyways, Emperor has ordered the Jing-An Ducal Residence is to be rebuilt, so that it can be used as an academy for the peasants' children. Many of the peasants have taken the initiative to help. Not only are they willing to do it voluntarily, they're even donating their own money and grain as well as their private collections of books. That kid, Dongzhuo, hasn't said anything at all but he does things very well so management is clear and logical."

Chu Beijie said, "Pingting is very worried about him. I'm currently wondering whether or not to wait until the matter of the Jing-An Ducal Residence has been resolved, but send another Order, so he can be summoned into the Royal Residence for Pingting to see him."

Ruo Han thought for a bit and frowned. "He handed me a form, indicating that he wanted to stay in the Jing-An Ducal Residence because he would like to guard the graves of He Xia and He Xia's ancestors. And, when the Jing-An Ducal Residence is rebuilt and the academy opened, he would still like to stay in the academy to help the children of the peasants. But if he is decreed to come, he will definitely come."

Chu Beijie shook his head. "No need to force him. Just let him stay there. Pingting will be a bit more relieved if the Jing-An Ducal Residence affairs are left to him."

After the people scattered in the sweet haze of alcohol, Chu Beijie came to retrieve Changxiao who had been left playing there. Yangfeng sent him all the way to the door, quietly asking, "Is Pingting better?"

Chu Beijie's face darkened a bit, "It's a sickness of the heart, the hardest to heal. I'm afraid it'll take a long time."

Yangfeng sighed, "Being distraught is inevitable since she grew up with He Xia."

Chu Beijie knew that and sighed too, "Don't worry, I'll look after her properly."

He carried Changxiao back to the Royal Residence, seeing Pingting in the distance.

His most beloved woman was standing alone in the porch. Her face had its usual leisurely elegance, and her eyes were fixed on the centre of a nearby lake. It felt like murky darkness at the bottom of the lake would be clarified, having its mysteries unveiled with her wisdom.

Changxiao yelled, "Mother! Mother!" He ran and pounced forwards.

Pingting heard her son's voice and shifted her gaze away from the centre of the lake. She turned and pursed her lips in a smile, bending down to hug her son. Chu Beijie walked over, holding her around the waist. "What are you thinking, standing here so thoughtfully?"

Changxiao was hugged by Pingting for a bit before thrashing around, wanting to play on the ground. Pingting bent down and let him free, patting his head. "Be a bit careful. Don't play with the knife-knife." She then straightened to answer Chu Beijie's question, "I'm thinking about the Queen's Crown."

Chu Beijie was very curious, "Why would you ever want such a tacky thing?"

Pingting shook her head, "Not mine, but Yaotian's."

Chu Beijie knew she was still upset over He Xia. His arms tightened, letting her comfortably lean in his chest. He slowed his voice down, "Why are you thinking about Yaotian's Queen Crown?"

Pingting was silent for a long time, frowning deep in thought before saying, "Do you still remember our past?"

Chu Beijie thought for a bit, smiling, "I remember every single thing about our past. Why don't you let me listen to the ones you're referring to?"

Pingting closed her eyes and thought for a moment. Her delicate lips moved slightly, listing, "The five year truce in the valley, the death of the two Princes of Dong Lin, Pingting's hunger strike. It's just a rough number, but we actually had three opportunities."

Chu Beijie was baffled, "Opportunities for what?"

Pingting raised her head to look at Chu Beijie, her bright eyes flashing as she replied, "If you had been heartless, not giving any mercy to Pingting, in these three opportunities, we would've been like He Xia and Princess Yaotian."

Chu Beijie laughed, "I'm not He Xia, nor are you Princess Yaotian."

Pingting gave him a profound look, sighing sadly. "True. That's why I'm not Princess Yaotian, and you are not He Xia."

This sigh seemed to take away all of the sadness of life and death. She remained in Chu Beijie's arms, only feeling incredibly warm and comfortable.

The clever me, the stupid me, the kind me, the evil me...are they all the me you love?

Pingting stayed in Chu Beijie's warm embrace, revealing a sweet smile.

The sun set in the west, and the moon came out.

We once swore to the moon, to never turn against each other.

This kind of love, one that wouldn't turn against each other, was perhaps something mortals could not shatter.

## Chapter 75 (Special)

—Confusion over beauty can be either sexual and aromantic. Sexual and aromantic are very different, and should not be said in the same sentence.

All the trades gradually flourished.

There was peace, and the world was in its golden age. The chaos among the four countries was recalled as an incredible loss of life. If the Emperor of today, the formerly famous general Chu Beijie, had not decide to come down the mountains and put an end to the chaos by uniting the world, who knew how many more years people would be able to see such bustling towns on this way?

A slender hand opened the curtain of the carriage, letting the sounds and sights of the lively outdoors flood inside. There were sounds of sales, laughter, and the bartering sounds of young wives buying food. It was constantly noisy.

A pair of beautifully bright eyes flashed, glancing at the world outside before reservedly escaping back into the darkness.

The carriage was exquisite and refined, complete with gold and silver. Even the horses' bridles were built from silver. There were a total of eighteen guards riding horses in the front and rear, quietly trotting across this flourishing area.

A boy and girl sat in the carriage, neither of them ordinary nobles. The girl was a bit older, having a delicate face like a plum blossom. Her lips were red enough without lipstick. She had a rare noble air about her which stunned everyone.

She was the Princess of the Weihao House from far away. Her name was Yin Luo, renowned as the most beautiful child amongst the House. Because of her intelligence, she was the Chief of the House's favourite.

The other person was her elder brother, Yin Yi. The two siblings had come far away from home, bringing a large number of treasures to reach this strange land for something very important towards the Weihao House's future.

"What is Sister thinking?" Yin Yi asked.

Yin Luo pondered for quite a long time, replying, "I'm wondering what the Emperor of the Ting country looks

Like. His stories have been spread in the world for many years, so he must be an old man now."

Yin Yi chuckled in spite of himself. "How did Sis come to such a conclusion? This Emperor was a famous general since young. He led the army to guard Dong Lin country at the age of fifteen, going through numerous battles. His enemies would shudder at the faintest scent of him. After that, for some reason he disappeared to live in seclusion in the mountains, refusing to appear in the world again. Only after all of the generals and the four countries were ruined by chaos did he finally come out of the mountains to settle everything, establishing the Ting country. The Ting army has only been established for six years, and when you add them all up, he's only a little older than thirty, the peak state of men."

Yin Luo didn't know whether to believe her brother's words. She quietly lifted a corner of the curtain, peeped outside and suddenly said, "The Ting army."

"What's wrong?"

"The Ting army"

Yin Yi's face was full of surprise. He shouted the driver to a stop. He shuffled beside Yin Luo, asking, "What's wrong?" He then followed Yin Luo's gaze outside.

There was a three-storey high restaurant on the side of the street. A large flag rested against the pillar of the open lobby. The banner had the words, "The incidents of the past described and exchanged with passerbys." A man who appeared to be a storyteller was shaking his head as he sat outside, surrounded by a large circle of people eager to watch what was going on. It appeared the restaurant happened to be open that day, and the owner had set up their lobby to attract customers to the storyteller, making him a bit more popular than usual.

"Move the carriage aside for us to get a bit closer."

"Sis..."

"It'll do no harm. We've plenty of time." Yin Luo pursed her lips and smiled at her brother.

When Yin Yi saw his younger sister's sweet smile, he didn't want to disappoint her, so he ordered the guards following them to stop and wait for a bit. When the carriage was a bit closer to the entrance of the restaurant, he ordered the driver to reward the owner of the restaurant with some money and alcohol. He asked the storyteller to speak a bit louder, so that the people inside the carriage could hear.

The storyteller was currently at an exciting part.

"When the Emperor of today read the description of the letters about the chaos in the four countries, although his eyebrows were furrowed for a long time, he refused to change his original plan. He told his subordinates, 'I already don't care about these things. No matter what you say, it's useless. There are too many suitable heroes under the skies to settle the four countries. There's no point in me being the one to do it.' From his words, it seemed that there was no way he agreed to go out of the mountains."

At these words, all of the anticipated looks in his audience changed. They sighed loudly and someone yelled, "Why didn't our Emperor come out of the mountains? The world was already such a mess then."

"What are you panicking about? If the Emperor hadn't agreed to come out of the mountains, where would we get our peace today?" The storyteller laughed a bit and drank some tea to refresh his throat. His expression completely changed, "When his subordinates heard this, they immediately panicked, 'Why is Duke still not doing anything at such a time?' Heh, this panic caused his subordinate to think an extremely clever plan. He told our Emperor, 'Although there are many heroes under the skies, you are the only one who can save Miss Bai. Miss Bai is currently in danger, and if you don't go, our future Empress may not be able to hold out.' When the Emperor heard this, his expression changed. His eyes widened, roaring, 'Who dares to harm my Emperess? I shall kill him!'"

The storyteller angrily glared, vividly and deeply touching the audience's heart, but an unfathomably good-natured laughter chose this pause to ring out. "Your lies don't add up in your storytelling. The Ting country was still non-existent then. How could that subordinate possibly know Miss Bai would be the Empress in the future?"

"Huh, it's not like no one thinks you're intelligent if you just stay quiet. Those words of yours are just like a drain." The storyteller became serious, "Speaking of Miss Bai, her history is extraordinary. She grew up in the Jing-An Ducal Residence of Gui Le, able to sing and appreciate dance since young. Forget her renowned qin, she was gifted in men's tasks of study and war. A fortune teller says she is a goddess descended from the skies, to assist the master of the mortal world beneath. After the King of Gui Le knew this, he sent orders to marry her, not expecting that when Miss Bai saw the King of Gui Le, she said, 'You're not qualified to marry me, I will only marry the real master of the mortal world. After that, she chose our Emperor as expected. Ah, can't you see how great her judgement is?"

Yin Yi was sitting in the carriage, chuckling. "What a load of rubbish. When put like that, that woman is practically

invincible in everything, rather like a monster.”

Another person respectfully replied, “Mister, you said our Empress is a goddess descended from the skies, so she must be an utter beauty right?”

“Of course, her beauty is ethereal.” The storyteller’s face was full of admiration and praise, “She really is the finest colour in this world, one that no one can rival. Her face is as delicate as a flower, her voice like an oriole. Back then our Emperor had seen hundreds of fields of such flowers, but when he saw the Empress, he forgot all of these beautiful women at first sight, only having the Empress left in his eyes.

“Isn’t that wrong?” An old man began to squint, rather suspicious, “I heard back then our Empress and Emperor fought against each other in Bei Mo country, at least that’s what that Storyteller Zhang or something said.” It appeared others heard the same thing and all nodded.

“Lies!” The storyteller grimaced, “The Emperor and the Empress are a loving couple. How could they face each other on the battlefield? Don’t listen to that Zhang’s nonsense.”

The debate was rampant, but the curtain slowly lowered.

“Nothing particularly important, let’s go.”

The horse began to step slowly.

Not long later, the carriage moved out of this tiny town. In the distance, there was a newly paved road. The sides of it were lined with delightfully green grass, and there seemed to be no end in sight.

Yin Yi quietly studied his sister. They travelled for a long time before he opened his mouth to say, “Don’t listen to that storyteller’s rubbish. There aren’t any goddesses. No matter how the Empress is as beautiful as a flower, she won’t be as beautiful as Sis. Even if she is more beautiful than Sis, how could she still be since more years have passed for her? When Sis enters the Palace, I’m sure the Emperor’s heart will be tied to Sis.”

Yin Luo’s gaze turned towards Yin Yi, coldly sweeping across his face. Yin Yi was still thinking he had said the right thing until he noticed her cold gaze appeared to be piercing right through his body. He could only shut up.

“The Ting army is too strong. The Ting country has strong horses and men to unite the four countries. Although my Weihao House is far away, we are also vaguely threatened. Father is correct. Arranged marriage is perhaps the only way to protect my House’s future.” Yin Luo sighed softly, wryly smiling, “Yin Luo is just afraid that the Emperor may not be able to be trapped by beauty. If it’s like that, then Yin Luo’s trip would be wasted.” She suddenly appeared to have suddenly thought of something. She frowned as she mumbled, “Ting country, Ting country? ...That Empress’ nickname, isn’t it Pingting?”

Yin Yi’s heart was uneasy at this. He forced a smile as he comforted, “Please don’t sell yourself short, Sis. I still think there’s no man under the skies who can ignore Sis’s beauty. The Emperor is a man too, and the Empress must be nearing thirty. They should be tired of each other, being married for so long, so it’s about time to find new love. As long as Sis puts her beauty into good use, there’s no need to be afraid...”

“No need to say any more, Brother.” Yin Luo turned away, “We’ll know what to do when we meet this inscrutable goddess of an Emperor. I have plans of my own.”

In the humid air, there was the damp thuds of hooves.

Outside the window, the wilderness was boundless. Their destination of the trip, the capital of Ting country, should be at the end



The Weihao House was a renowned family in the far distance. The House's men were martial, puissant, with fine skills in combat while the women were beautiful, slender and gentle. They had both heroes and beauties. Because of the House's established nobility status, they were rarely attacked by others and hence not afraid of outsiders, allowing them to accumulate treasures over many generations.

If it hadn't been for the Ting country's immense power or that their Emperor, so wise despite his young age, was one that even caused the elderly Chief of the House to fear, the Weihao House would have never sent their unprecedented beauty and treasures.

During dusk the next day, the party transporting the treasures and the beauty finally, after a long journey, reached the capital of the Ting country.

The one responsible for greeting them was the Emperor's most trusted Tiger General, Moran. Moran was on his horse at the very front, leading the party to a majestic residence. He got off his horse and walked to the side of the carriage, raising his voice, "Please disembark, Princess. The Emperor has ordered me to welcome Princess to follow me into the residence, to see the Empress."

Inside the carriage, Yin Luo and Yin Yi stiffened at their words, their eyes meeting each other's helplessly.

Yin Yi was curious, "We have come from afar and still have our House's flag up. Why is it the Emperor not seeing us first but the Queen? And why the sudden display of authority when we have only just arrived?" His face was rather annoyed.

"What need is there for Yin Luo to be afraid of, having only an authoritative wife in the entire residence?" Yin Luo faintly smiled, her radiance escaping into her surroundings.

Yin Yi's confidence rose considerably. "Nice, Sis, that's the way you should be. Don't ruin our Weihao House's first Princess' fame." He got up and helped Yin Luo down the carriage, as she was wearing Weihao's heaviest clothing.

Moran hurriedly stopped him. "The Queen only wishes to see the Princess. This way please, Prince."

Yin Yi gave a look of dissatisfaction at Moran and was about to protest when Yin Luo softly assured, "Don't worry, Brother. I will have to go alone into this residence one day, sooner or later."

"Remember, no one beats your beauty. No one is more qualified than you to get the Emperor's favour." Yin Yi tightly held onto her hand, whispering.

Yin Luo studied him for a moment, nodding, "Yin Luo will remember that."

After successive quiet steps, she followed after the beckoner, each step taking her deeper into the residence.

Yin Yi waited for a whole three days in the guesthouse specifically to attend important guests of other noble families. He hadn't received any news from Yin Luo in the last three days. How was she? Had she gotten the Emperor's favour? Had she overcome the Empress' power?

Not a word of news had been received!

The Emperor had solemnly summoned him, receiving the Chief of the Weihao House's letters and gifts as well as returning many gifts of his own.

The monarch whose power was beyond measure was very young and handsome, not like a man of thirty at all.

Yin Yi spoke on behalf of his father, expressing the House of Weihao's desires and intention to peacefully interact.

The Emperor smiled proudly, "The peasants have had enough of chaos caused by war, so I won't use soldiers for no reason." He then added, "The Empress doesn't like war either." At the mention of his Empress, his handsome face had a passing hint of gentleness, one that could not be concealed at all.

Yin Yi was secretly alarmed by this and took opportunity of the moment to ask about her sister who was summoned away by the Empress.

"The Princess?" The Emperor said, "Oh well, the Queen feels a bit bored in the Palace, so lets the Princess accompany her for a bit before making further decisions."

To this inscrutable Emperor, Yin Yi couldn't ask any more after that.

That day, the Emperor was in a good mood as he talked. He talked about the world's trends, military power, country borders, and commercial trades. He even went on to talk about this year's complete harvest of rice and how the homes of the officials in the courts were doing. He started small but then big, even casually issuing several imperial decrees on the way before turning and smiling at Yin Yi, "What does Prince think of this?"

Ze Yin took a step back, his head bowed.

He finally understood why this man would always make his enemy tremble in fear. He had such strong courage and sharp eyes that could see right through people's minds, completely capable of destroying invisible enemies.

After dismissing himself to the Emperor, he left the grand hall. Yin Yi sighed at the guards leading the way out, "The Ting country has such a wise monarch. I reckon no one in this world is able to guess the monarch's mind."

The guard laughed at these words, turning back, "Prince, you're wrong. There's someone who can guess the Emperor's mind with one hundred percent accuracy."

"Oh?"

The guard put up a single finger, mysteriously pointing in the distance. As for what he was pointing at, it was the Queen's residence tucked deep inside the Palace.

"The...the Queen?"

A strange kind of uneasy feeling began to slowly rise from the bottom of his spine.

In the last three days, this uneasy feeling hadn't left once. Yin Luo, his most beloved younger sister, was currently revealing the first Princess of the Weihao House to what kind of woman? Would she cause their House to be hated? Would she emerge the winner of this new battle in the palace?

He suddenly remembered when the Emperor mentioned Yin Luo, he referred to her as "the Princess", not directly calling her name. Could it be that the Emperor didn't even meet Yin Luo yet?

Yin Yi paced back and forth in the guesthouse as if a beast trapped in a prison.

Their peaceful intentions had already been conveyed, therefore their purpose was achieved. But he couldn't bear abandoning Yin Luo to the depths of the Palace. If Yin Luo wasn't able to find happiness, she would have a miserable fate.

People were people. They were always too eager to achieve their goals and only regretted when the price had been

paid.

“How is Princess Yin Luo’s situation?”

“I want to see the Emperor.”

“I want to see the Queen.”

“None of them are okay? Fine, I want to see Tiger General who led my sister into the Palace back then!”

He had wanted to pull out his sword and fight his way out several times, as if Yin Luo had already been murdered by that evil wife in the depths of the residence. He absolutely detested himself and found it strange how he had sent his sister from thousands of miles away to this strange place, without a single complaint, to fight an impossible battle.

His words of comfort to Yin Luo were all lies, all a load of nonsense!

He was just a jerk who exchanged his sister for a peaceful life.

The moment before Yin Yi was about to go crazy, Yi Luo returned.

She had already changed into the Ting country’s clothing for noble women. Her clean white silk clothing complimented her cascading black hair, making her look particularly distinguished. When she entered the room, she looked at her brother for a long time, before lowering down her head. She pursed her lips and began to chuckle. She chuckled for quite a long time before raising her head again, looking at Yin Yi’s helplessly surprised and delighted expression.

“I saw the Empress.” She only spoke a few words after a long time.

“What on earth does she look like? I don’t believe that she’s more beautiful than you. Sis, she didn’t use the her Authority as Empress to bully you, did she?”

Yin Luo thought for a long time before murmuring, “Should not be said in the same sentence...”

“What?”

“I said...” Yin Luo had the expression of recollection. Her gaze drifted to the distant palace bathed in sunlight, “Should not be said in the same sentence.” She abruptly turned back, giving Yin Yi a dazzling smile, “Brother, let’s go home. The Queen said I can choose to stay in the Palace or go home. No matter what I choose, my mission has been fulfilled, and so the current and future generations of the Ting country and the House of Weihao will be allies.”

She looked at Yin Yi’s expression of disbelief, and then, like a freed phoenix, she delightedly spun in a circle.

“Brother, let’s go home.” The brilliant light of youth flashed in her dark eyes.

Confusion over beauty can either be sexual and aromatic.

Sexual and aromatic are very different.

Therefore, they should not be said in the same sentence.

In a single country, there was no need to insert the finest colour of another Duchess, when there was already the finest aroma of the Empress.

Go home, the first Princess of the Weihao House. Although you may have planned to gain the favour of the Emperor, you are fated to be forgotten in the long run.

That is not your destiny.

Go home, young and beautiful girl.

You have not experienced those angry horses, bloodied clothes, days of military confrontation, the brilliant sound of guqin, the terrible oppressive feeling of despair, the endless resentment, the courage that could swallow the world, the feeling of wild, fierce love that not even a hundred thousand storytellers could fully portray.

Go home. Your bell-like laughter should be echoed in your happy home, echoed in the ears of your loving parents.

Late at night, deep inside the Palace, a pair of wise eyes silently stared at the bright moon in the sky.

A palace maid quietly came in from outside, bowing as she reported, "Madam, that Princess has departed, leaving the capital tonight."

Pingting looked up. She was leaning comfortably on a soft pillow.

"Where is General Moran?" She suddenly asked.

"I don't know."

"Is he in his official residence?"

"I heard he hasn't returned."

"Is he accompanying the Emperor in dealing governmental affairs?"

"From the manservants beside the Emperor, I heard the Emperor talked to the two Senior Officials, but General wasn't there."

Pingting was lost in thought for a few moments, sadly saying, "Then he must be chasing. I don't know whether he's alone or has taken a thousand or so men."

The palace maid looked at her in puzzlement. This woman who created this world suddenly snorted in laughter, chortling like a child. She clapped softly, "I bet he definitely can't stand it. That dear Moran, dignified Tiger General, had his soul entirely caught by the young Princess in just three days. Oh well, you ought to try the taste of love as well."

The palace maid said, "You go see the Emperor. Ask the Emperor to hurry and make arrangements to take over the responsibilities of the Tiger General, so when he is found missing, no one will be too confused."

Chu Beijie happened to return at this moment. He asked while stepping into the room, "Who is missing?"

Pingting smiled as she recounted everything again before continuing, "You haven't seen how Moran found all sorts of excuses to visit me. From new tributes required to be looked over by the Empress to a celebration coming up soon in the Palace, and all sorts of programs that the Empress had to look over in advance. Aren't they all excuses to see the Princess? But I reckon that Princess is too intelligent and won't be so easy to obtain. Moran has a lot of hardship ahead."

Chu Beijie burst into laughter. "Can he suffer more hardships than me?" He dismissed the palace maids with a wave.

hugging Pingting and carrying her to the bed.

Pingting reddened at his sight. “You...are already a dignified Emperor. You ought to behave yourself a bit more.” She turned away, which was a perfect gap for Chu Beijie to take the phoenix hairpin, allowing her hair to spill all over the bed.

Chu Beijie slowly came closer, smelling the aroma around her neck. He whispered, “Does Empress still remember the song she sung for me back then?”

“I don’t.” Pingting rolled her energetic eyes, a little bit angry, “I just remember that a certain someone smashed my qin, locked me in a small cottage in a secluded residence, and abused me hundreds of times.”

“I admit that was my fault.” Chu Beijie quickly surrendered before softening his voice again, “It’s been such a long time. Don’t tell me Empress plans to spend all the time on recalling our long story of the past?”

Pingting pursed her lips and chuckled sheepishly. She sighed, a bit sadly. “True, it’s a long story, one that not even an entire lifetime will completely recall. So long, so long...”

Back when she had been with Chu Beijie in the secluded country, chaos had yet to fall on the four countries.

If it hadn’t been for the greed of human hearts to desire to succeed, to dominate all power and poison the people of the world, how would such a strong Ting country be established, as well as this imperial couple?

So, like this, this long and arduous story was like the one song Pingting played, creating life with her five fingers.

The moon hung in the sky, gently casting its light down above these two people, who were above ten million.

Do you still remember we once swore to the moon, to never turn against each other?

Perhaps we have truly never once turned against each other.

#### Translation Notes:

- “Confusion over beauty can be sexual and aromatic...” (ch75): Google says this is an adaptation from Lu Pu-Wei’s biography, which details about sex culture in Ancient China. There are a few puns/references to this saying in the chapter which is really hard to explain. The character for “colour” typically refers to sexual/physical, “aroma” refers to aromantic/mental. Therefore, when the storyteller uses the term “finest colour” to describe Pingting, it’s hinting her sexual beauty. But obviously, she isn’t...Yin Luo was able to tell Pingting was actually the “finest arom”.
- “Tiger General” (ch75): Usually referring to the best five military generals serving under a ruler, but this was not an actual term in history. Well, it appears Moran is the only one with this title.

/fin.

## Translation Extras (Comments, Trivia etc.)

### *The People*

I don't know how much of this is actually true (because it is fan translation and I don't really want to bother the author about how much detail she deliberately put in), but it's always quite interesting to go into the extra detail a bit...The names: I always translate [last name] [first name], in the order I see it in. I try to group the first name's characters

together if applicable, otherwise I generally decide whether their name would look better grouped or not. Here are some of the main names and their meanings, for you to laugh about maybe.

*Bai Pingting* – “Bai” means white, which we know is linked to her so-called birth. It could also refer to her personality too. Funny enough, it’s also a real surname, albeit rather rare. “Pingting” is only and rarely seen in written texts, meaning “a woman who has a graceful demeanour”. That’s her right? Comically, google translate often gives “Painting”.

*Chu Beijie* – “Chu” is a real surname, no doubts there. It has a number of meanings, “order, tidy” and “suffering” (written language only). “Beijie” doesn’t mean anything particular, “bei” means “north” while “jie” means “prompt, quick”. While I don’t know what the significance of “bei” is, I do reckon the other two seem about right. Comically, google translate often gives “Chu North McNair” (or something along those lines).

*(Chu) Changxiao* – “Long laugh”

*Yangfeng* – “Sun phoenix”

*Ze Yin* – “Regulation” and “administer/oversee”

*Ze Qin* – “Regulation” and “celebrate”

*Zuiju* – “Drunk chrysanthemum”. I laugh at her name every time.

*Fanlu* – His name may be “Pan Lu”. “F/Pan” means “Barbarian” and “lu” means “foot of a hill”.

*He Xia* – “He” means “why” (but it is actually a surname too) and “Xia” means “hero/brave/chivalrous”. I thought this name really fits him, because in theory he should’ve been a hero, but he didn’t, so it’s sadly ironic.

*Yaotian* – “Sparkling sky”.

*He Su* – Same “He” as He Xia. “Su” could mean “respected/solemn” or “eliminate”.

*Ruohan* – Modern translation gives “If Korea”. The character for “Korea” may actually be a reference to Han (state), during the Warring States period of China. It was the frequent target of Qin (the “winning” state) and had tried to self-strengthen itself, but was the first of the states to be conquered. Well, Bei Mo was too.

*(Chu) Moran* – “Indifferent”

*Sen Rong* – “Forest” and “honor/glory”

*Fei Zhaoxing* – “Fly according to the line”. Ironic really.

*Dongzhuo* – “Winter burning”

*Gui Changqing* – “Expensive” and “evergreen”. The “Chang” is the same “chang” in “Yun Chang”.

*Luoshang* – “Luo” has a number of meanings, net, screen, gather, display. It may have been a surname. “Shang” means “esteem, value”. There’s a governor during the Western Jin Dynasty, but I don’t think his name is alluding to that.

*Le Di* – “Le” is the same “le” in “Gui Le”, therefore it may have been “Yue”. “Di” ironically refers to a low ranking but elderly official.

*Le Zhen* – Same “Le” as Le Di. “Zhen” means “shake.”

## *The Countries*

Here are how they are literally translated. The names are typically linked to a particular feature of their country. I believe only Yun Chang will keep its name in the drama, but perhaps that will change closer to release date.

*Dong Lin* – “East Forest”, and if you look back, Dong Lin is quite a foresty place.

*Bei Mo* – “North Desert”, there’s a lot of references to sand and dust.

*Yun Chang* – “Clouds Often”, so basically a place that often has clouds. There were some puns and stuff about Yaotian that I thought alluded to that.

*Gui Le* – “Owns Joy”. Now that I look back, it’s most likely mistranslated from “Gui Yue” (Owns Music), because there are a lot of references to music. I recall translating it as “Le” because no matter how you look, “joy” is a nicer word than “music”. It’s basically one of those characters with more than one way of pronouncing and meaning.

*Ting* – “Pavillion”. It’s pronounced the same as the “ting” in “Pingting”, but written without the radical that means “female”. So basically, Chu Beijie does name the new army/country after Pingting, but altered it so it was more suited for a gender-neutral army.

## *The Title*

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang is very often known as A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated. I’m not too sure whether it was me (back in the old days) or if someone else did the translation. I’d like to point out why I’ve never particularly liked using this name, but at the same time, why it’s something that I consider appropriate.

So, let’s start by breaking the title up. “Gu” means “solitary” thus “lonesome”, “Fang” means “aromatic” thus “fragrance”. So yes, the first part is indeed about “a lonesome fragrance”. Some nice English words there...

The next part is the tricky part. “Bu” means “no”, “zi” means “oneself” and “shang” means “to appreciate” (or “to reward”). If we gather this up in one sentence, it becomes “doesn’t appreciate [oneself/itself]”. The more correct reflexive pronoun in terms of English is really difficult to decide on since “herself” can’t be used, due to the neutrality of the Chinese pronoun.

So whoever (may be me, may not be me) translated this title probably thought that if this pronoun problem couldn’t be solved, why not shift the nouns around a bit? So thus, “waiting to be appreciated”. To me, this suggests the so-called lonesome fragrance is waiting to be appreciated because she doesn’t appreciate herself enough. When someone else appreciates her, she loses it because she doesn’t appreciate herself enough in the first place (you can’t properly love someone if you don’t love yourself first—at least to some extent). Therefore, she learns about the important lesson about “appreciation” because she waited for someone else who appreciated her first.

Alternately, you can use the same principles to explain the literal translation. She doesn’t appreciate herself enough, so she loses it when someone else appreciates her. Therefore, she learns the important lesson about appreciating herself. Although the “waiting” isn’t in the original thing, it’s something she did do unconsciously. That’s why I too would probably have translated the title as the one so well-known as of today.

But yes, the most literal translation is “a lonesome fragrance who doesn’t appreciate [oneself/herself/itself]”. Even google translate’s ridiculous “Gufang not self-reward(ed)” might be a bit closer literally. But to me, “a lonesome fragrance waiting to be appreciated” has the best approximation of the original title in terms of style and English grammar without losing too much of the meaning



To me, however, Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang will always be Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang. This was mainly because the original title is condensed in meaning; not a single word is unnecessary (e.g. “a” or “to”). This made it much easier for things like formatting PDFs and references, because the title wouldn’t be so long. Finally, English typically uses more diverse language than Chinese, in terms of synonyms, but each English synonym is a little bit different in meaning. I suppose, it’s just really hard trying to convey the right atmosphere sometimes.

## *Errors*

This is mainly due to alternate meanings (sometimes objects don’t need to be too specific in Chinese), so there are a number of things that “may” be wrong due to my own assumptions. Here are some of the ones I came up, but I’m sure there are more.

*Flag of control, command flag* – This could be any kind of object.

*Gui Le* – See above.

*Laughter, smiles* – The character for both is the same, so it’s hard to distinguish.

*Official, Senior* – May be alternately translated as “Minister, Prime”

*Plural/Singular* – No differences in Chinese.

## *Easter Eggs*

There are some brilliant Easter eggs in this novel. I can’t be bothered going back and finding them all, so I’ll just name a notable few on the top of my head. Unfortunately, I don’t remember the word recaps and plays too much, but you can go back and hunt them if you want to.

*The storyteller*: Have you noticed how there’s often an accompanying voice beside him (his disciple)? I think their first obvious appearance is commentary about Chu Beijie and Pingting’s disappearance and how they escaped to Bei Mo. He may have appeared even earlier, as one of the men in the very first chapter.

*Storyteller Zhang*: Names are important in this story. If you went back, you’d notice that one of Pingting’s kidnapper had the same name. Doesn’t it make you wonder a bit about whether they’re the same person or not?

*A-Han*: I think I mentioned it, but he was also the guy who Pingting sold her horse to when she left Dong Lin/Gui Le for Bei Mo. She also mentions it, so this one was quite obvious.

# *Acknowledgements...*

## *Bits and Pieces from xah...*

This complete translation of Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang wouldn’t’ve been possible without the help of all of you, and I’d

like to specifically acknowledge a few of you. Thank you to everyone who actually got to know me, particularly those who registered on the forum and took time to comment on the forum, chatbox or facebook. Special thank you to my wonderful proofreader StarWarrior who I actually got to know very well and briecheeze, idlerhapsody, puzzlesdragon, awesomejou, Red Elice, aoikun, The Useless Translator etc. You have all been amazing and your support over the years has been top-notch. Thank you to all who offered to translate for me, instead of immediately thinking to take over the project on another site. I didn't ever get as many translators as I wanted and most of you disappeared in the end (as usual), but I really do appreciate you all. Thank you to my MIA and retired staff who I got to know well too, particularly RavieSeeker, KawaiiPanda10, OniGoji and flameshaft. None of you worked or read this series, but pulling through to the end really depended on you all. Thank you to those who linked to my site when posting links to read, or to the download links I have provided, rather than reupload PDFs, txts etc. I really do appreciate those who tried to uphold my wishes. Thank you to the author for writing such a novel. Thank you for giving me permission to translate, and thank you again for writing such a brilliant novel that has brought enjoyment to so many others. Finally, I leave everyone with one of the only quotes I ever remember, by Dr Seuss. I feel like it fits perfectly at the end of any great piece of literature or milestone in life. "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." So yeah, there you have it. Thank you all again for whatever reason I may have given (or not given) and thank you again for following this translation through the years.

Yours truly,  
xah.

*Thoughts from StarWarrior...*

Hello everyone!

It's been a great adventure proofreading for xah. I remember the first time I encountered xah's website while on a journey to quench my thirst for stories. Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang immediately had me hooked. I offered my help to xah to improve the reading experience and allow you readers to bask in the story. I appreciate every one of you who supported and encouraged xah. Without our founder, we would not have the opportunity to read such a romance. Believe me, my heart was on a roller coaster the entire time I proofread. And although there are times when the deadline is around the corner, I wouldn't have it any other way. Thanks to all the friends I have made since joining the website and the Sweets War—briecheeze, flameshaft, and RavieSeeker to name a few. I commend xah for the unwavering persistence and undying devotion to translate as well as upkeeping the website's background. This light novel possesses many memories. Again, thank you all for the support. I would be more than happy to proofread any more of xah's work. Everyone patiently waited these years during the progress. The journey's over, but life has many more in store. Continue to read and open your mind to new worlds.

Greatest Wishes,  
StarWarrior

This full volume translation wouldn't have been possible without everyone's help! Including the support from the readers!

*Book Six:*

Special thanks to the following staff...

Translators:	xah
Proofreader:	StarWarrior
Reference:	The Useless Translator
Quality:	xah

*Book Seven:*

Special thanks to the following staff...

Translator:	xah
Proofreader:	StarWarrior
Reference:	The Useless Translator
Quality:	xah

*We hope you all enjoyed the ride!!*